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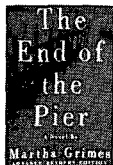
## A LITTLE PUBLICITY NEVER HURTS

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by Sybil Baker

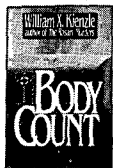
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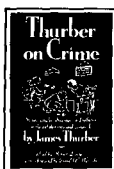
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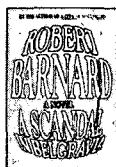
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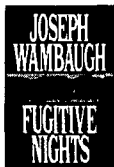
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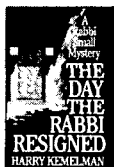
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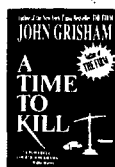
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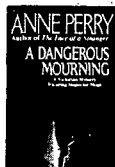
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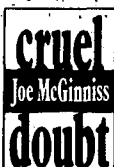
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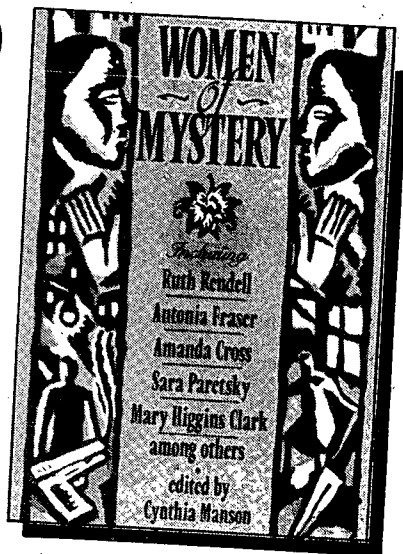
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# TOP WHODUNITS BY THE TOP WOMEN IN THE FIELD



**F**or the first time ever, here are fifteen of the best mystery stories by women taken from the pages of *Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine* and *Alfred Hitchcock's Mystery Magazine*. Thrilling tales by Ruth Rendell, Sara Paretsky, Mary Higgins Clark, Faye Kellerman, Amanda Cross, Joan Hess, Antonia Fraser and eight other terrific writers are included.

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# EDITOR'S NOTES

by Cathleen Jordan

**T**wo brand new story tellers are among us in this issue; in both cases we present their first published fiction.

Frank Michaels, author of the delightful "Mrs. Edgecliff," is a Long Islander and a computer programmer. He tells us that he formerly worked in the defense industry, "making fighter planes and drawing cartoons for the company newspaper. (I was, I suppose, one of the world's few defense-industry cartoonists.)" Besides cartooning, his interests include "cooking, kung fu, painting, and keeping the cats out of my wife's fish tank."

David Waskin, author of "Heroes Never Say Goodbye," a Michigander, is a recent graduate of the University of Michi-

gan and a potential high school English teacher. His summer jobs during college included work as a stringer for a small newspaper. "I started writing short stories in high school for a creative writing class," he says, "and liked it so much that I just kept on doing it."

From the "old pros" in this issue, we think you have some especially pleasant (as well as properly mystifying) reading ahead. Robert Halsted brings us a new adventure in the saga of Walt and Millie in "The Mystery of the Missing Marsupial"; Sybil Baker has produced a wonderful teaser of a cover story in "A Little Publicity Never Hurts"; and Dan Crawford has revised the fairy tale past most of us share, in his own inimitable way.

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# "WHEN I SEE MY EX-HUSBAND, I HAVE THIS SECRET TRICK I PLAY ON HIM..."

by Leslie McClennahan

Did you ever notice that when you're fat, men don't look you in the eye? They look across your shoulder. There's no eye contact.

My name is Leslie McClennahan. I'm a real person. I live near Goose Creek, South Carolina. Up until two years ago, I was never looked in the eye. By anyone.

I was too tired to be a lover to my husband. I was falling asleep by 8 o'clock most evenings. When I did go out for an evening, my husband was ashamed of me. And said so to my face. When I walked, my thighs brushed together. I couldn't even cross my legs. I was fat. Not just "overweight." Fat. I was 5'5" tall and weighed 205 pounds.

About 18 months ago, my husband Darrell left a "Dear Leslie" letter on my dresser. And filed for divorce.

I went for counseling. I knew that my weight was the source of my troubles. But I'd tried 14 different diets. One by one. And I failed at all of them.

My counselor listened carefully and recommended an entirely different program. This wasn't a "diet." It was a unique new weight-loss program researched by a team of bariatric physicians—specialists who treat the severely obese. The program itself was developed by Robert Johnson, M.D. of Charleston, South Carolina.

I entered the program on October 2nd. Within the first four days, I lost only three pounds. So I was disappointed. But during the three weeks that followed, my weight began to drop. Rapidly. Within the next 193 days, I went from 205 pounds to 124 pounds. To me it was a miracle. This was the first time in my life I'd ever lost weight and kept it off!

The reason the program worked was simple. I was *always* eating. I could eat six times every day. So I never felt deprived. Never hungry. I could snack in the afternoon. Snack before dinner. I could even snack at night while I was watching T.V.

How can you eat so much and still lose weight?

The secret is not in the amount of food you eat. It's in the *prescribed combination* of foods you eat in each 24-hour period. Nutritionally dense portions of special fiber, unrefined carbohydrates, and certain proteins that generate a calorie-burning process that continues all day long... a complete 24-hour fat-reduction cycle. Metabolism is evened out, so fat is burned away around the clock. Not just in unhealthy spurts like many diets. That's why it lets you shed pounds so easily. Without hunger. Without nervousness.

And it's all good wholesome food. No strange foods. You'll enjoy a variety of meats, chicken, fish, vegetables, potatoes, pasta, sauces—plus your favorite snacks. Even some light wine or beer if you wish.

This new program must be the best kept secret in America. Because, up until now, it's *only been available to doctors*. No one else. In fact, The Charleston Program has been used by 207 doctors in the U.S. and Canada to treat more than 62,500 patients. So it's doctor-tested. And proven. This is the first time it's been available to the public.

There are other benefits too...

- ▷ There are no amphetamines. No drugs of any kind.
- ▷ No pills. No powders. No chalky tasting drinks to mix.
- ▷ There's no strenuous exercise program.
- ▷ You don't count calories. Just follow the program. It's easy.
- ▷ There are no daily charts or records to keep.
- ▷ You eat foods you enjoy. Great variety. Great taste.
- ▷ You can dine out.
- ▷ There's much less fluid retention.
- ▷ There's no ketosis. No bad breath odor.

But *here's* the best part...

Once you lose the weight, you'll *keep it off*. Permanently! I guarantee it!

Let's face it. We all have "eating lifestyles." Our eating habits usually include three meals a day. Plus two or three snacks. We all love snacks. Especially at night.

But most diets try to force us to change all that.

And that's why they fail!

The Charleston Program lets you *continue your normal eating lifestyle*. You can eat six times a day. You can snack when you wish. So, when you lose the weight, you can keep it off. For good. Because no one's forcing you to change.

Here are some *other patients* from South Carolina who entered Dr. Johnson's program with me.

Marie C. is a 42-year-old woman who went from 167 to 139 pounds in just three and a half months.

*As I got into the program, I began to feel better, to develop more energy. Now my husband has trouble keeping up with me—in every way! I'm proud of my new body.*

Dr. Karl D. is a 36-year-old man who went from 275 to 145 in only six months!

*...words cannot describe how good I feel. I'm not hungry or tired at all. I feel alive again!*

Fran H. is a 52-year-old woman who went from 223 to 135 in five months.

*The world treats you differently when you're fat... not just the social world, but the business world. My whole world has changed since getting those 88 pounds off!*

Josette C. is a 33-year-old woman who went from 165 to 119 in four months.

*My husband has started looking at me the way he did before we got married. He's starting to show jealousy when other men look at me or want to talk to me... it's wonderful.*

And then there's me.

Whenever I see my ex-husband, I have this secret trick I play on him. I know a restaurant where he goes with some of his "buddies." I love to go there with a date—I have plenty now—stroll past his table and whisper, "Hello, Darrell!"

I know through the "grapevine" that his friends often ask about me... Who am I?... Am I single? And he has to tell them. I love it.

Obviously I'm excited about the program. This is the first time it's been available outside of a clinical setting. Dr. Johnson has asked Green Tree Press, Inc. to distribute it.

We'll be happy to send you the program to examine for 35 days. Show it to your doctor. Try it. There's *no obligation*. In fact, your check won't be cashed for 31 days. You may even post date it 31 days in advance if you wish.

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To order, just send your name, address and postdated check for \$12.95 (plus \$3.00 shipping/handling) to The Charleston Program, c/o Green Tree Press, Inc., Dept. 271, 3603 West 12th Street, Erie, Pa. 16505.

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FICTION

# A Little Publicity Never Hurts

— by Sybil Baker —

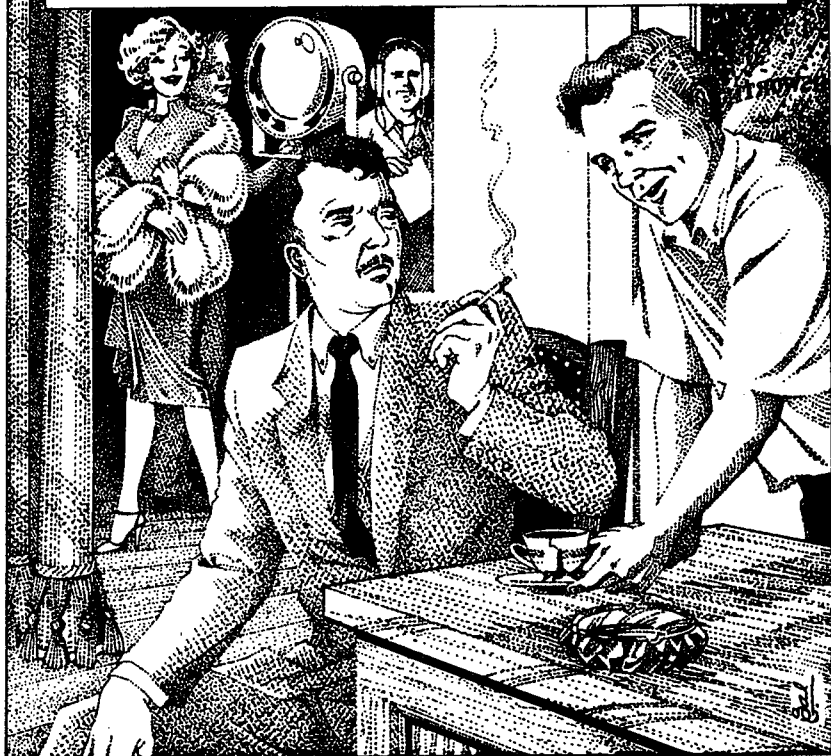


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**T**hose days, there was a bunch of newspapers in New York. So when Bobby Darling gets sprung, there's one fotog at least and one reporter from each of them, outside the jail. Then you got the radio and the TV guys, all tripping over each other's cables and yelling at him to turn this way or that. And all the theater people who had been in on the demonstrations, with all the signs, *Free Speech, Free Bobby!* and all that.

Anyway, so of course Bobby's showing his dimples, putting his arms in the air like a prize-fighter, making with the wise-cracks, hugging his girlfriend, his parents, his girlfriend's parents, his pals from his acting class. Even the teacher was there, his acting teacher.

And then this little weasely old character in a silk suit elbows through the crowd, and the theater people all know him. They fall back, nudge each other, like a freakin' crowd of peasants when the king comes on stage, know what I mean?

So this old guy comes up to him, and it's obvious Bobby knows who he is, and his eyes get wide.

And the guy says, "Twinkle, twink!e, little star."

Well, it's funny now, but Bobby doesn't take it that way

at the time. He looks like he's swallowed his gum. He's like he's sitting on this big egg of happiness, and if he moves it'll break or something. Finally he gets a smile on his face you could see in New Jersey, and he says, "How 'bout *big star?*"

Turns out this guy is the most important agent in town. Signs him on the spot. And after that, Bobby goes right to the top. Straight from the tank. Unbelievable.

But I was the one that broke the story.

Every year since then when he opens in a show he sends me a pair of tickets. Fourth row, fifth row center. He can't put us on the aisle, see, 'cause that's where the critics gotta sit.

He's a nice guy. I mean, in those days he was a goofball. Hey, this was 1952, he was eighteen. I just wish I'd had the space to tell the whole story in my stories for the *Mirror*.

**W**hen they threw Bobby Darling in the slammer, he'd been in town almost a year, him and his girlfriend Ruthie. Both from Staten Island, both green behind the ears, I mean wet behind the ears.

Right before they graduate high school, the two of them announce they're gonna go live in

Manhattan and get into show biz. The two sets of parents have all known each other all their lives, so they're a united front, and all summer they argue with the kids, at both houses. Come fall, the screen doors are practically off their hinges with all the slamming, and the folks give in.

One foggy day in September, they take the ferry to help the kids find apartments. Plural. No question about that, those days! Bobby and Ruthie stand by the railing watching the water slosh below them while the parents have coffee inside.

After a while the air gets clear as a bell, and there's Manhattan in the distance. Ruthie has long red hair that is blowing all over her face. She's so excited she looks like a small, friendly shark—she has one of those smiles, in a narrow face, that seem to show more teeth than most people. And Bobby, who was born with a choirboy face, has spent so many years with various goofy expressions on his mug that you'd have to say, well, whaddya know, it *did* freeze that way, just like they said it would.

Ruthie throws a penny in the water and clasps her hands, making a wish.

"Not bad, Toothy, ya hit the water," Bobby says in his Donald Duck voice.

Ruthie does Goofy, that dog in the Disney cartoons. "Gyuhlp. You call me Toothy, and you better duck, Duck."

Then they drop the cartoon voices without skipping a beat.

"Whadjia wish?"

"That we get in Aaron Milner's class."

"Yeah." Aaron Milner was a famous acting coach at that time. Bobby gazes at the skyline, still small in the distance, then takes out a quarter. His fist quivers around it for a minute, like he's rattling dice, before he tosses it into the foam.

Two coldwater flats they end up with. Which actually means you get hot water but no heat. Bobby is in a basement apartment, twenty-five seventy-nine a month, at East 49th and Third. "At least it's close to the furnace, thank God," says his mother, shaking her head and biting her lip. Ruthie's parents look all over the West Side, to make sure she'll be far away, and pray they'll find something there on a halfway-safe block. But maybe the prayer hit a cloud bank and ricocheted. Some nun they know has a brother who's a landlord; the girl lands in a fifth floor walkup on East 47th Street and Second Avenue. Her dad almost has a heart attack carrying the cartons up the stairs.

Then they all go to the Auto-

mat and have a big meeting. The parents say they want they should both promise they won't do anything, the kids; that they'll save it for marriage.

Bobby is shocked to the core. "How can you even think we would do something like that?" he asks. He's practically in tears, he's so hurt. When Ruthie smells injustice, she goes nuts. Bobby loves this in her. He never knows what she'll say next, and she's the only person he's ever known that he can say this about.

"Too late!" she practically spits out at her folks. "Don't forget, Bobby and I played doctor together when we were seven!" She storms out of the Automat and her dad sends Bobby running after her. The parents end up apologizing, and the kids end up promising.

They audition for Aaron Milner, get in, and are assigned acting partners. For almost a year they work on famous scenes. Shakespeare, Clifford Odets, Eugene O'Neill, Chekhov, Tennessee Williams, what have you. But they aren't allowed to learn a line; all they do is improvise. That was the system. Say the scene is some prince of a guy in Shakespeare with his eye on a throne, okay? So the kid translates the situation into something he can re-

late to: he's gotta get this part or he has to leave show biz, something like that. Then after a while they improvise closer to the scene, and finally when they do the scene, they understand it. Except they don't do the real scenes till next year.

Now, between the classes, they meet at each other's places and do improvisations, improvise on their improvisations, or whatever, preparing for the next class.

Bobby always goes to his partners' apartments for these rehearsals. Next to him is an old lady, Mrs. Flavin, who's home all day, and he can hear her cooing at her cats; he can hear the soap operas on her radio. So it would cramp his style to think she could hear him if he ranted and raved, improvising on some big scene.

At night, he and Ruthie wait tables at two different restaurants. And when they aren't working or studying, they make rounds. That's what they called it when they visited all the agents, trying to get someone to sign them up or send them to read for something. Some of them did it every day, I understand, just hoping for that big break. That's funny because in Bobby's case the big break was the big bust, right?

Anyway, they all had these gimmicks with the agents. One

guy in the class had learned all the birthdays of all the agents' families, so he could suck up to them that way: "Hi, just dropped in to say happy birthday to your wife, and I hear Philco Playhouse is looking for someone like me," and all that.

Ruthie's partner, Bruce O'Donnell, changed his first name to Dog. He'd call all the agents every day, and he'd just bark on the phone, see? And the agents all knew him, they knew his voice. He'd go woof woof, they'd say, "Nothing for you today, Dog." But once in awhile they'd throw him a bone, a walk-on, or a bit part.

Bobby didn't need a gimmick. With a last name like Darling? You kidding?

Bobby would walk in some agent's office and say, "Hi, I'm Robert Darling. Pleased to meet you. That's the last name, darling. I mean Darling is the last name. But you can call me dear," he'd say, flashing the grin, or "But you can call me honey," or whatever. And sometimes he'd do this with a voice, so he could show his stuff. A Donald Duck voice, right? Or as Eisenhower, or Bogart, or Bugs Bunny, or Marlon Brando. Brando was still playing in *Streetcar* then. The kid had been fielding these cracks all his life, with a name like that, you know that. He was

used to thinking on the balls of his feet; he was the class clown, and he lapped it up. "Hey, you can call me Dogmeat," he'd add sometimes. "Just call me, hey." The agents would drop the fish-eye and almost smile.

But nobody calls him. Nobody even sends him to read for anything. He tells people, "I would *kill* for an agent. To get an agent, I would kill." Good thing he didn't come to trial, that's all a jury would need to hear.

In those days all the actors hung out at the NBC Pharmacy at 30 Rockefeller Plaza. So one day after lunch Bobby is standing in line at the cashier's there with Ruthie, and he's clowning around. The guy right in front of him hears him, and next thing you know he tells him to go over to the C. Steadley Thomas advertising agency and see the casting director, Joe Delaney, for a part on *Intrigue*.

The guy is a head taller than Bobby, with a classic profile. "They said I was too good-looking," this guy says. "They don't know what they want. I told them they wanted a character actor, somebody younger. Tell 'em I suggested you read for the office boy. Name's Richard De Vita."

"Gee, thanks, wow!"



"Gerald Manley's doing the lead."

"Gerald Manley? Wow."

De Vita writes the casting director's name on his card, underlines it with a flourish, hands the card to Bobby, turns to go, snaps his finger and turns back, as graceful as an Olympic ice skater. "Hey, you like tea?"

"I like it okay. Why?"

"Well, tell 'em you love it. The sponsor is Tiptop Tea." And then the goodlooking guy flows off, without a backward glance.

Bobby is bowled over. A total stranger! He tells Ruthie, "If I couldn't be an actor, I'd shine actors' shoes, I mean it."

At about the same time, across town, Gerald Manley himself is leaving Toots Shor's. As the doorman whistles for a cab, two teenage girls see Manley, and they squeal his name. This brings a delivery boy, also a guy with a long nose on him, and two ladies in hats. Manley keeps the taxicab waiting while he signs autographs.

After getting the autograph, the guy with the long snout walks down the block and gets into a tan Chevy. It's really a souped-up vehicle, and Schnozzola, it turns out, is FBI Agent Brian Swertlow.

Manley gives the cabbie his Park Avenue address. Now, he's in his fifties at this time.

But when he settles back in the seat, he seems to gain ten years. He burps absentmindedly. The dark hair, silver at the temples, seems drabber. The slim silver mustache looks a lot less—what's the word—jaunty. And the bags under the eyes seem to go from carry-on to Tourister size. He's alone, see. These guys need a public. If he'd realized Swertlow was tailing him, he mighta perked up.

Swertlow can't find a parking space near Manley's pad, so he doubleparks on 68th Street. Then he joins Agent Jack Ritchie in a delivery van parked across the street and a few doors down from the canopied entrance to Manley's building.

The stakeout is as boring as usual.

Swertlow tells his partner, "I got his autograph today. Don't tell the inspector. For my niece."

Ritchie, who could stand to lose a few pounds, is on his second pastrami on rye. "How old is she?"

"What? Oh. Sixteen."

"Well, make sure she don't ever meet him."

"You said it."

Ritchie wants to know if any of the girls ever get any parts.

Swertlow gives a short laugh. "Sure they get parts. But they're all, shall we say,

private parts, and that ain't what they're after."

Everybody the agents talk to seems to know something about this guy, this bigshot actor. And a few can repeat gossip about the prostitution ring he's set up, luring teenage girls from Nashville to New York with the promise of theatrical careers. But there's no hard evidence. The case is proving harder to assemble than a do-it-yourself kiddie truck on Christmas Eve.

At C. Steadley Thomas, there's a waiting room full of actors. Bobby approaches the receptionist. She is a woman on the far side of middle age, with auburn hair, piled high. She's typing rapidly. Flat-handed, the way women with long nails do. Hers are the color of blood, and almost every finger has a ring on it.

Bobby stands there holding his picture and resume; finally she stops typing and grabs the picture. So now, instead of looking at Bobby in the face, she's looking at his face in the picture.

"Richard De Vita suggested I see about a part on *Intrigue*."

"Oh yeah? Who's Richard De Vita?"

Finally she condescends to look up at Bobby, who's standing there bug-eyed at this ques-

tion. "You mean, *the* Richard De Vita?" she says.

The actors in the waiting room laugh. "Yeah," says Bobby. This gets another laugh, for some reason.

The receptionist gives a raspy laugh herself. "I'm pullin' your leg, kid."

Bobby's on safe ground now. "Well, give a tug on the other one, willya? I can use the height."

Now the receptionist turns to her audience, full-face, cueing the yuks. Then she concedes that Richard De Vita is a good egg and has talent.

"To burn," agrees Bobby, who never laid eyes on the guy before today. Bobby asks if he can see Joe Delaney. Then, waiting for the receptionist to reply, he does this crazy thing, it's a habit of his, shifting his weight from one foot to the other, like his body is acting out yes-no, yes-no. He only does it when he's nervous, and he doesn't know he does it.

"Settle down!" the receptionist rasps. Bobby didn't go to high school for nothing; he settles down. The receptionist puts one hand on her hip. "Mr. Delaney only sees people he's seen. He seen you in anything?"

"No."

They stare at each other.

"Go on in," she says.

*Intrigue* was a half-hour TV show done live at 30 Rock, in Studio 8H, upstairs from the pharmacy. This episode is called "Loyal to the End." It stars Gerald Manley as a police captain who can't believe his lifelong buddy on the force has gone bad. The part Bobby is up for is an office boy, a twerp, the comic relief supposedly. The twerp has a crush on the boss's daughter. It's a small part but a crucial one, see, because in one scene, where Bobby gives him a cup of tea—on most shows it would have been coffee, Bobby figured—the twerp is trying to convince the cop that his buddy is a wrongo. Meanwhile, the buddy is murdering the boss in another part of the office.

So there's Bobby with the director and the assistant director, and he gives the reading all he's got. "Very nice," says the director afterwards.

"How do you feel about tea?" the assistant asks, his head inclined just so. "The only reason I ask is, whoever gets this part will have to drink absolute buckets of it."

Bobby appraises his questioner. Impossible to tell if this guy is making fun of the product or not. He takes a chance. "I love tea," he murmurs, like he's saying I love Sophia Loren. "I think that's why I felt so comfortable reading for this,"

he says, gesturing at the carpet. "The color of tea."

The other two exchange a slight smirk.

"I'm not just saying that," says Bobby. He quickly loosens his tie, unbuttons the top two buttons of his shirt, and reaches inside. "Whaddya think this is?"

"A tea-shirt, I'll play," says the assistant director.

"Do I make my point? What do you think I have for dinner? A tea-bone!" He leans forward confidentially. "And where do I take a leak afterward?" The two look blank, so he gives them a clue: "Think Indian."

"Teapee," says the director, rolling his eyes and adding without a pause, "We'll let you know, kid."

Bobby gets the part. He doesn't come down to earth until the first rehearsal.

And wouldn't you know, he's a real dud. The best acting he does all day is pretending to be nonchalant about it. He picks Ruthie up at the end of her shift, at ten, and they go to her place so she can coach him.

It's early June, it's hot as blazes, even at night. Ruthie's pad is under the roof. Only two windows, both at one end. Water closet in the corner. Down one wall, the fridge, the sink, the stove and bathtub. The bathtub has a cover on it so you

can use it as a counter top. Through an arch is the next room, if you can call it a next room, with the single bed and dresser.

No cross-ventilation, in other words. They sit at the table, which is covered with a new blue and white checkered oil-cloth. Arms on the table, he reads her the half-hour script. They're both dripping like candles. Then he loudly unpeels both forearms from the table-cloth, holds his nose with his left hand, and pulls an imaginary chain with his right.

"You're playing the twerpiness, you're not letting it happen. That's all it is. So big deal! You haven't even improvised, am I right?"

Silence.

Ruthie looks at him deadpan. "Sure, that makes sense. The first time you get a job where you get paid for your acting, you forget all you've ever learned about acting."

Bobby makes a face. She's right.

"Okay. What if . . . okay. You know something about Dog, you want to warn me. Okay? Okay. Give me a minute, okay?"

Bobby heads for the front door and stops, shaking his head. "So hot."

"So use it."

He ambles out, closes the

door softly, stands on the landing under the bare bulb. Maybe he's found out Dog has bribed the landlord to get Ruthie's apartment. That would work. Meanwhile, Ruthie is thinking hard. Maybe Dog has just given her two tickets to *Waiting for Godot*. Up the ante: orchestra seats!

The improvisation works like a section editor on deadline. Bobby senses he's on the right track now. "You were fantastic, Ruthie," he says afterwards. "You're fantastic." They've promised the parents they won't put themselves in harm's way by ever kissing indoors. So they go down to the stoop awhile.

Gerald Manley has worked almost constantly for thirty years, starting out in radio and then with frequent leads on all the hour shows: Studio One, Philco Playhouse, Kraft. Bobby's mother is nuts about him. Last year, the two of them argued for half an hour once about whether he was a star or not. Even as a kid, Bobby remembers asking his mom what was so great about him. "What are you talking, everything," she said. "His talent, his voice, his cheekbones." After that, Bobby called him Hambones.

For five days they rehearse in a rehearsal hall. And Gerald



Manley is just walking through his part. Is he saving it for the show, or what? It's like he's bored, he's reserved, he doesn't pal around with anybody, he doesn't talk to anybody. At the rehearsals, all the time when he's not on, he does crosswords, or preens the hair or twiddles the mustache.

Once Bobby gets a look at one of the crosswords Manley's working on. It's full of madeup words. That's the only thing Bobby finds to like about him.

Manley doesn't even pay that much attention to his wife, who's less than half his age and a real doll. She's a model, in fact, with a husky Southern drawl, and she drops in on the rehearsals a lot.

Now the tea scene goes something like this. The captain and the office boy come into this big corner office. Captain says, "Nice of Amanda Farnsworth to let us use her office while she's at lunch."

"Sure is," says the twerp.

"What do you think of our Miss Farnsworth?"

"Ohhh," says the twerp adoringly, or at least Bobby does it that way. "Oh, she's so sensible, she's so practical. She's real . . . level-headed." He's so in love he's breathing hard.

"You go for her?"

"Who, me?"

The captain eyes a hot plate

at the side, where a teakettle is on. "Well, if she's so sensible, tell her not to leave the kettle on, lad, when she's off the premises."

Then they start the tea bit, and the twerp makes the captain a cup of tea and has one himself. "Getting back to the lieutenant," he says.

The captain interrupts. "You've got him wrong. I've known him fifteen years. If it sounds syrupy to call another man sweet, then call me molasses. But this guy is sweet. He'd give you the shirt off his back. He'd give you the top of the morning and put a spin on it. Know what I mean?"

"Yeah. But captain—"

"And smart."

"There I'd have to disagree, sir."

"What's your meaning, lad?"

"Well, I'm glad you asked that. I mean, there are different kinds of smarts."

"And there are different kinds of smart-alecks."

Et cetera. It doesn't sound that funny, does it? But every day, Bobby adds little bits of business. Like when the captain says, "Then call me molasses," Bobby makes this *M* with his lips, or when the captain says, "Know what I mean?," Bobby says, "Yeah," but you see by his face he hasn't a clue what this guy is talking about.

Or just the way. Bobby scoots behind a chair after the cop calls him a smart-aleck. After awhile, the other actors in the show, the ones not in the scene, I mean, begin to break up when Bobby is on.

One time Manley's wife Cass has been watching Bobby. She has a low, gurgling, delicious laugh, and she's been laughing like a drain. A little later she comes over to the corner of the studio where Bobby's wandering around, learning lines, and comes right up to him, standing close.

"You're cute as a bobtailed bug's ear," she says.

He takes a step backward. "Is that so?"

Cass arches her back so her front sticks out. "How 'bout you? You take to me any?"

Bobby can play straight man as well as anybody. "I think you have many fine qualities."

"Jus' two."

They both chuckle.

"Boy, that's an old one," Bobby says. "Did you see Milton Berle do that bit the other night?"

Cass sits down and crosses her gorgeous legs. Her nylons whisper. "Uh-huh." She's looking at her legs. "No, I'm lyin'. My legs ain't so bad, neither."

Then she sticks out both legs in front of her, with the high heels of her anklestrap shoes

flat on the floor and her toes pointed up, like a kid. She applauds her legs with complete objectivity. "Sixty dollars an hour. Just for the legs sometimes."

"Boy, is that what models get?" Bobby switches to his Donald Duck voice. "And I think you must have a good mind, also, to control those feet from so far. I mean, I'm twice as close to mine, and I got all kinds of trouble." He goes into a comical little routine of tripping over himself on the way to a chair, which he dances with a moment, getting more and more entwined, until he and the chair land tangled on the floor.

She laughs and laughs while he jumps to his feet again. "C'mere, darlin'."

He obeys instantly.

"So happens you're right about my good mind, though. I do have a good mind. I have a good mind to take you home with me."

Bobby's poise takes wing as suddenly as if his pants had just dropped around his ankles. "Uh," he says. "Uh, can my girlfriend come, too?"

Cass gives him a long stare, and mimicks him. "Kin my girlfriend come, too?" Her eyes are narrow and mean. "If you don't know, who does? And I bet you *don't* know, do you? What

d'you do, hold hands in the park?" She turns on her heel, but turns back for a parting shot: "Why don't you learn some manners!"

Bobby avoids her the rest of the day. He can't even look at her. But the next day she acts like nothing happened. After his opening scene, he goes to sit with a couple of the cast members, and she comes over to take the chair right next to him, nodding at him and smiling.

"Real good, darlin', I mean it."

Bobby pauses. "Thanks."

"You're only three years younger than me, how'd you learn to act so good? So well?"

Bobby is still wary. "Oh, just born under a lucky star, I guess."

Cass glances across the room at her husband, who is talking with the director. "I spend a lotta time there myself."

When the cast moves into the studio, the day before dress rehearsal, Bobby has a new audience: the camera crew. They laugh so much he's inspired to discover some new bits. But Manley is stiffer than ever. "Doesn't he even care that you're stealing all his scenes?" whispers the actress who's playing Amanda.

Bobby does a long high shrug, and acts like his shoul-

ders are stuck there, has to bring them down with a hand on each in turn. Making people laugh, for years it's been a way of life with him.

The dress rehearsal is a disaster. After her first big scene with Manley, Amanda mutters to Bobby that she would have gotten more from a store dummy. Even Roy Grant, the guy on the Tiptop account from the ad agency, is worried. He must be worried, Bobby figures. He keeps babbling to everybody that everything is tiptop.

Waiting for his cue at the performance, Bobby suffers the agonies of the damned. He makes his entrance in a trance, but the red eye of the camera, instead of scaring him even more, steadies him. All of a sudden, he can do no wrong. When Manley blows a line, Bobby improvises a moment until they get back on track. He feels like he's in an altered state, all-powerful, at home and at ease in the gentle, electric hands of the gods.

At the cast party afterwards, he's still flying high.

Ruthie is shy with him, for the first time in her life. They sit next to each other, responding to wisecracks from the rest of the cast. But in between, in a low voice, he tries to explain to her what he felt on the set.

"It's called talent," Ruthie murmurs back.

"Think I'll get an agent out of it?"

She nods solemnly.

"Hey, where's Jerry?" somebody says, meaning Gerald Manley. "Did anybody ask him to join us?"

The guy playing the cop's buddy says Jerry didn't feel well.

"Oh really? No, he didn't act well," says the actress who played Amanda.

"We know that, but how about his health?" cracks Bobby, and everybody laughs.

Bobby hits the sack at two A.M. But of course he can't sleep. Flat on his back, he finds his mind racing through the mottled dark. He's sold himself around town as a comic, a character actor, accent on the comic. But maybe that was limiting! When he felt so limitless!

Why typecast himself? Why not do serious stuff, too? Look at his work in class. Acting was simply behaving naturally in an imaginary situation. He could put himself in anybody's shoes. Just sell himself as an all-round capable actor. He laughs into the dark. All-around capable genius. "Or jerk," he says aloud. But he feels as if his ambition is some great primitive creature that has been penned up, and now

it's raging to get out, to leap the wall and carry him to the heights. Hamlet. Henry V. Stanley Kowalski in *Streetcar*. Come on, he tells himself. Too short, be realistic, too nutsy looking.

Oh yeah? Who says? Suddenly he shivers. Ambition vaults over common sense, and doubt shrivels into dust. Maybe the reality, the *real* reality, is that he has boundless talent, boundless imagination, in a world that had suddenly opened up, like a pearly oyster shell, into a great blue boundless ocean of possibilities. Know what I mean?

He doesn't drift off until dawn.

FBI Agent Tom Schwada is as morose a guy as only a middle-aged one-woman man can be after a bad divorce. But he's still known as an ace interviewer. The morning after the show, he's trudging up the steps of the building where the Bureau is located, and Swertlow suddenly appears at his elbow like a puppy with a ball in his mouth, waiting for a throw.

"Hey, Tommy! You watch *Intrigue* last night?"

"Nope. Caught the Dodgers. A massacre."

"I heard. My Mann Act case had the starring role, and somebody bumped him off."



"On the show?"

Then Schwada steps into the revolving door, so Swertlow has to repeat himself in the lobby.

"No, for real. Oh, you mean does he die on the air? No, he gets home first. Ritchie was there all night."

A few minutes later, Inspector Frank Santini holds a meeting to outline the case so far. He starts with reviewing the Mann Act case the Bureau is building, and moves quickly to the night of the star's death. His wife is there during the broadcast. The Manleys don't go to the cast party afterwards but go straight home. "And according to the wife, the victim has a fit in the cab."

Poison is Agent Schwada's meat. He asks, "Like convulsions, sir?"

"Exactly," says Santini. He says Manley has a ham and cheese on rye around five P.M., but nothing else to eat before the show. "During the show he has a cup of tea. At home, Manley feels better but says he needs a drink. The wife brings him a bourbon. He hardly gets it in his hand, she says, when he drops dead. Then immediate rigor mortis. All the classic symptoms of strychnine poisoning."

The inspector says Cass herself calls for the ambulance. The cops are alerted, and the

Homicide Department's coroner is there within the hour. Autopsy results are still pending. "But I wanna get right on this before the guys at Homicide come in and muddy the waters."

Swertlow asks: "So we got other suspects, sir? Besides the wife?"

"A whole cast of characters," says the inspector.

Half an hour later Mrs. Flavin, who lives next to Bobby, is on the phone to her daughter while her two young cats sit licking each other on an arm of the sofa. The sofa is so clawed up it looks like shredded wheat.

The two men descending into the basement stairwell hear her say, "Well, I think I was too strict with you kids, so I'm more permissive with the kitties." They pass by her door and ring Bobby's buzzer. Then they ring it again.

Inside, Bobby groans into his pillow. "What?" He hasn't raised his head yet, but finally the buzzer grates an outer layer of sleep off him, and with his eyes barely open, he puts a bathrobe on over his pajamas and stumbles to the door.

Schwada says, "Morning, young man. Got a minute? FBI, Agent Tom Schwada."

Swertlow says, "Agent Brian Swertlow."

They flash a couple of cards, and if Bobby had been fully awake, he might have noticed. Anyway, one word is swimming through the fog, and it finally penetrates. Agent! He wakes up in a jolt of happiness, thrilled from head to toe.

"Can we come in?" asks Swertlow.

"Oh, sure, sorry, sure, sure!"

Now, Bobby's apartment is even smaller than Ruthie's, though it has a separate bathroom. Otherwise, just one small square room with a kitchen area at the end. As the two men step in, Bobby takes some papers off the one chair in the joint, runs his fingers through his hair, puts the collar of his pajamas outside the bathrobe collar, thinking all the while, wow, I really *must* have been good for them to come over like this! "So you saw the show, huh?"

"Yeah. You had me rolling on the floor, kid," Swertlow says.

"Thanks. Gee." Bobby grins. "Gee, I didn't know agents came to your *house*."

One of Swertlow's eyebrows goes up, but Schwada doesn't move a muscle. "Well, sure, if the job calls for it," he says.

Bobby beams. "Thanks," he says, nodding. "I really worked on it." He pauses. "It's really a pleasure to meet you. Uh,

please, uh, sit down." He indicates the chair and the bed. "Would you like some coffee?" He's trying to think what the heck their names are, a lot of S's is all he recalls. Should he ask them? He's so happy he can't think straight.

Taking the chair, Swertlow says "no thanks" to the coffee, and Schwada lowers himself onto the bed, telling Bobby that he could use a cup, thanks. "I'll just change, excuse me a minute," says Bobby, grabbing some jeans and a shirt off a hook in the kitchen, and disappearing into the bathroom.

A minute later, he's dressed and in the kitchen area, looking for the coffee. But the room is so small it's a cinch to play host at the same time. "Um. You both work for the same agency?"

Swertlow can't hide his surprise. "Yeah."

"So, um, how, um, how long you been agents?"

"Long enough. Listen—"

And Schwada answers at the same time: "Oh, about twenty-seven years," and then they both pause, so as not to interrupt each other.

"Boy, it must be a real kick to discover people."

"It has its moments," Schwada says.

"I bet." He finds the coffee. Thank God.

Swertlow asks, "So what did you think of Gerald Manley?"

"Well," Bobby says, "frankly, I've never liked his work that much. I think he's a little stiff." Immediately he wonders if he should have said this. Maybe the agents think Manley's a big talent. He searches their faces. "What do you think?"

"More than a little," Schwada says.

Bobby laughs in relief. "I mean, he doesn't even *turn*. When he turns, he *swivels*." He demonstrates, moving like a robot.

Swertlow chuckles. "Listen, hey, I heard his wife was there a lot, is that so? You get the feeling they got along?"

"Well, not really. I dunno. He really, he mostly kept to himself."

"Uh-huh," says Swertlow.

Schwada says, "So what was your impression of him as a person? Of Manley?"

"We didn't have that much—I mean, he was the star, he didn't—as a matter of fact, he only said one thing to me the whole time."

"What was that?"

Bobby does his Gerald Manley voice. "Watch it, kid, you're blocking me." He laughs.

Swertlow asks, "And were you standing in his way?"

"Well, just that one—just in rehearsal once."

The two agents are gazing at him earnestly. Bobby wonders if Manley is a friend of theirs after all. He puts an extra scoop of coffee in the percolator basket and turns on the gas. "He has a nice quality, though," Bobby says.

Schwada glances at Swertlow. Swertlow gives an almost imperceptible nod.

"Had," says Schwada. "The man's dead."

"Well, a little dead, yeah," says Bobby happily. "Yeah, I agree. He used to have more spark at least. But now, you're right." He holds his arms stiffly down by his sides, swivels, walks to the stove, checks the percolator, swivels again, and walks back toward the agents. "Here's Gerald Manley at an audition. For a lead at Macy's." He faces one side of the room, doing an obsequious store manager: "Now, we furnish the costume of course, Mr. Manley, a very nice pinstripe. And you'll occupy the middle window, of course." Then he hops sideways, facing the other side, and switches to his Manley voice. "'Are you serious? I'm no dummy, I want the corner window!'" Bobby can't help cracking up.

"Can you be serious?" Schwada says.

Bobby is taken aback. But only momentarily. "Yeah,

yeah, I can! I was thinking last night, yeah, I can be serious, just throw me the situation."

"Could be Manley was poisoned."

The agents are watching him like hawks. He gets the sense that he's being auditioned. "Poisoned," Bobby repeats. He thinks hard. "Okay. But I'll need to prepare a minute, okay?" He walks back to the stove, absentmindedly takes the percolator off the burner, and turns off the gas. "Poisoned?" he says, like he can't believe such a horrible thing.

When he turns around, he's got this bewildered look. "Who would've poisoned him? Look, he was—okay, he wasn't a giant talent, but he was a pro, he entertained the public for years, he did his best, man! Boy, I really felt for him, when he blew his line there, in the tea scene, did you know he blew a line?"

Swertlow shakes his head.

"No, nobody noticed. Listen, I've done that, we all have, right? Jerry's eyes were blank, but I think I could see the pain, and the humiliation. I mean, what's it like, if you know you're slipping? Maybe he knew! God, I hadn't thought of that till now, to tell you the truth. Poor guy."

Bobby's eyes fill with tears. He sniffles a couple of times.

"Listen, I'll tell you something. You know, my grandma was old, and gee, she was great when I was a kid, but it was like, I wish I'd understood better what she was going through later, when she was getting forgetful. Look, I saw a crossword that Jerry was trying to do. I dunno if he was kidding himself, or what, or just, just trying to hang on by his fingernails. But he just made up words." Now Bobby is crying. "Just made up words. I don't know why that should get to me, but it does."

Bobby is sitting on the floor, his knees up, rocking over them, trying to control his tears.

Swertlow starts to say something, but Schwada puts a finger to his lips. More than once he's had to deal with a perp who cried crocodile tears over the victim. In the deranged, it can be a sign of guilt, not innocence. Now, when the suspect is vulnerable, is the time to move in for the kill. He keeps his voice low. "Did you do it, son?"

Bobby looks up, surprised, wiping his eyes, then rises and walks back to the kitchen area. Swertlow almost drops his jaw when Bobby answers, "Okay, I did it." He asks Schwada, "Why did I do it? It would help if I knew why."

"You tell us."

Quietly Swertlow reaches for his briefcase, and takes out a big old fashioned tape recorder. "Mind if we record this?"

Bobby doesn't want to come out of his improvisation too much, but he can't help feeling pleased. "That would be great! You work with other agents, too? Sure!" Then he gets serious again. Hands on hips, he stares at the floor. Nods. Folds his arms, starts pacing. "I think it was his cheating that got to me. I mean, what's the point, if you don't give something? It's not all money! He cheated the public. He's been cheating them for years. I bet he was cheating on his wife!"

"Yes," Swertlow says.

"Yeah? I knew that, I knew it! That beautiful woman, that beautiful, genuine woman!"

Schwada says, "You have sumpn going with her?"

"You kidding? She couldn't stand the ground I walked on. She treated me like a kid. Both of 'em did, in fact. I can't take that. That really makes me crazy. Jesus!" He strides to the bed. Schwada quietly moves off the foot of it, never taking his eyes off Bobby. Bobby grabs the pillow and strangles it while he talks. "I'd watch him in rehearsal, how he ignored people, do you know what that's like? I could have been a bug on the

wall!" He throws the pillow on the floor, then kicks it across the room. He's really cooking now. "He had to go! Nobody has a right to act like that, I had to kill him, you know? I couldn't take it any more!" Bobby's index finger is jerking at his hip, like an eight-year-old playing he's got a gun.

Next door, Mrs. Flavin's hands are over her mouth, and her eyes are bugging out.

"So when did you poison him?"

"Oh yeah, right, poison. In the tea scene! Right on the show! Who would ever suspect, right?" He throws back his head and laughs maniacally.

"What did you use? Where did you get it?"

"Think I'm gonna tell you, copper? I got it at the store!"

The tape in the machine runs out. Swertlow stands up. Schwada clears his throat.

Bobby bites his lip. Did he ham it up a bit there, at the end? "I should have prepared more."

Schwada stares at him. Sometimes they just fall in your lap like a ripe plum.

The autopsy confirms that Manley had died of strychnine poisoning. I cover the preliminary hearing, see, later that day, that's when I do my first story. Bobby's folks have got hold of a criminal lawyer. And

he's good, but this particular judge is an old crock. Bobby keeps trying to explain to him he was only acting, doing an improvisation. "What gets me is that it wasn't even a good improvisation! I was reaching! I was indicating all over the place!"

"You were what?" barks the judge.

"Indicating. It's an acting term. I wasn't working well, your, um, sir, I mean Your Honor. I was, you know, I was just relying on old cliches, see, I hadn't prepared properly, see, in acting, before a scene, you gotta do a preparation—"

Down comes the gavel. "The court doesn't need an acting lesson, young man!"

Here's the headline on my story: SAYS DIDN'T KILL, JUST ACTED LIKE JERK. It's a sidebar to the main story, Manley's murder, which runs on the cover. My story's on page three.

And you know the rest. The wheels of justice back up after Bobby says he's not about to sue for false arrest. And the rest you know.

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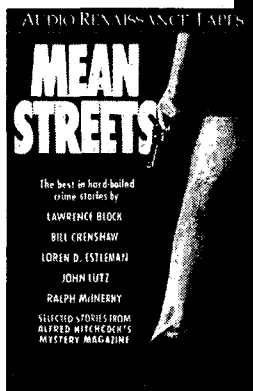
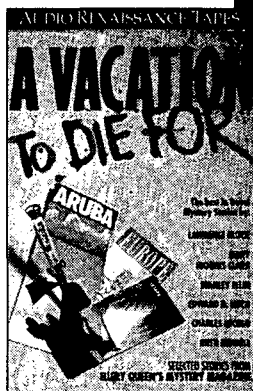
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FICTION

# Mrs. Edgecliff

by Frank Michaels

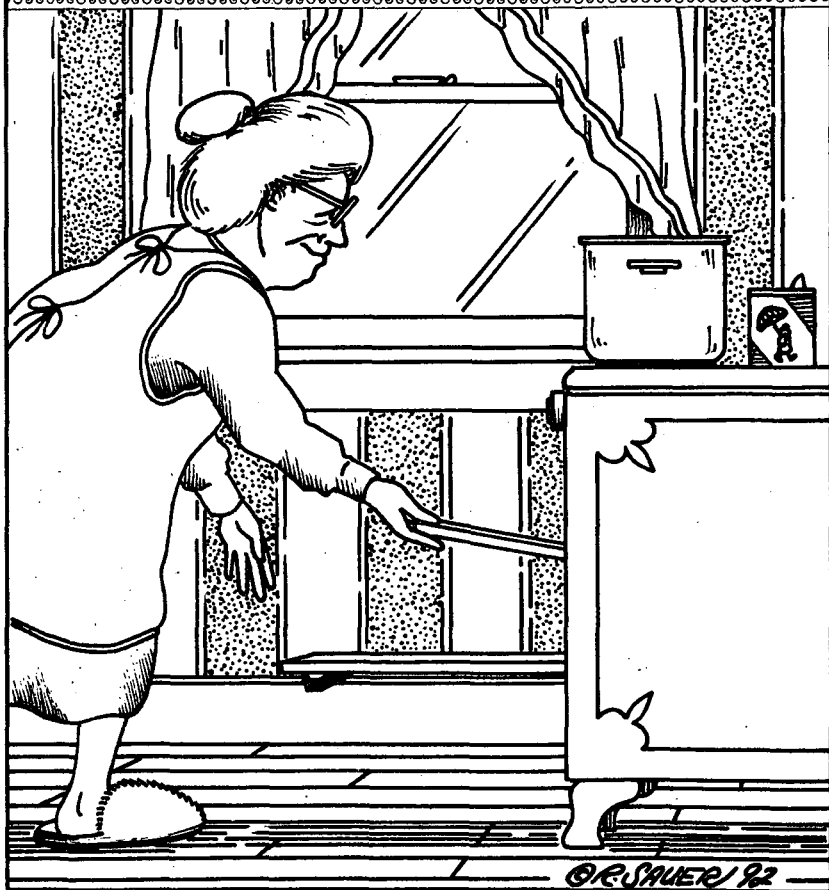


Illustration by Richard Sauer

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**M**rs. Edgecliff couldn't find a suitable baking sheet, so she decided to use the oven shelf instead. Moving slowly under the weight of her years, emitting a monologue of grunts and huffs and oh mys, she wrestled the stubborn thing out while Mr. Wainscot looked on.

"I never did care for electric ovens, Mr. Wainscot," she confided with a shake of her silvered head, putting the oven tray on her small Formica and tube steel kitchen table. "You know, I'm *still* limping from when that young brute bowled me over and ran off with my purse. Wouldn't it be ironic if he turned out to be one of my former students?"

Mrs. Edgecliff waved her hands in goodnatured dismissal and started rummaging through her junk drawer.

"Anyway," she continued, "a *decent* young man helped me up, and the policeman who took my statement was very nice, too. He asked me what I had in my purse . . . it was my big, black everything-bag, you remember. Well, I couldn't *exactly* say, of course, and there was no cash in it, so I just said, 'Oh, nothing of very much value.' He asked if I needed an ambulance, and I said, 'Oh, heavens no, I'm all right, just a bit shaken up.' He asked if I wanted to go down to the station to try to identify a mug shot of the boy, but I didn't feel comfortable about that. I hadn't gotten a good look at him. The policeman said he understood, and then quipped how the city was getting too rough for a woman of my age, and, well, I'm afraid *that* got my back up a little."

Mrs. Edgecliff drew a tangle of stout twine and a heavy extension cord out of her junk drawer and put them with the oven shelf on the table.

"I told him that I'd lived in this neighborhood my whole life, and had taught second grade here for *forty years* . . . and would still be at it if I hadn't been forced into retirement. I was a good teacher, Mr. Wainscot. They should never have put me out to pasture. I taught those boys and girls a lot more than just the three R's, mind you. I taught them *good citizenship*. I taught them love of country, respect for the *law*. Now that I think of it, that young ruffian could *never* have been one of mine."

Mr. Wainscot blinked at this but kept silent. Mrs. Edgecliff eased herself into a vinyl-cushioned chair and started untangling the string with her thin hands. She periodically wrung at her swollen knuckles, stiff with arthritis, and made slow progress.

"And what about those other two who broke in here just last

month? Broke into my *home*, can you believe? I haven't much, Mr. Wainscot, as you well know. I mean, just look at the paint peeling off the walls, look at the leaks in the ceiling! But I worked hard for what I have, and on my own, too. My husband's been gone twenty-seven years this August, long before you came along, Mr. Wainscot; you never met him."

She finished with the twine and started to work on the extension cord, sawing at it with a bread knife.

"Well, I wasn't surprised when those two hoodlums forced the door. . . . I'd seen them before, in the lobby, watching the tenants come and go—'casing the joint' I believe is the phrase. They took my jewelry, and what little cash I had on hand, and my liquor, but I *expected* them to take that, the hoodlums." She tittered naughtily. "Well, Mr. Wainscot, I suppose you know now that I like to take a little nip once in a while. But *never* during the week, and *never* once during the school year!"

Working carefully with the knife, Mrs. Edgecliff split the extension cord down its center, separating the two wires, then stripped about an inch of insulation from the ends. Mr. Wainscot watched with interest.

"The school year," she muttered wistfully. "You know, sometimes I get up early to watch the children waiting for the bus. It was all Miss Fairchild's fault, you know; she was the little vixen who pushed the school board into retiring me. How that little air-head ever got into administration is beyond me. Well, I suppose it *isn't* beyond me, Mr. Wainscot; *everybody* from the janitor to the pope knew she was sleeping with Principal Hardwell." She leaned closer, whispering confidentially. "He'd even gotten her *pregnant*, can you believe? Only a few of us knew *that*."

She twisted the ends of the wire onto opposite sides of the metal oven shelf, then stood with an effort and started searching through her cabinets.

"Now, where is my big spaghetti pot? Ah. Well, anyway, that's why she had me waiting alone in her office so long. She was in her first trimester and had to use the ladies' room every five minutes. Oh, and she was just so polite. 'We appreciate the service you've given us, Mrs. Edgecliff, but don't you think you have a duty to step aside and let the younger generation of teachers have their chance?' 'The younger generation of teachers have *their* chance,' that's what she said. It's 'the younger *generation* of teachers have *its* chance.' But I kept my mouth shut and listened politely to this

little trollop a third my age tell me *my duty*! And all the while she's flashing that big diamond engagement ring Dick Hardwell had given her. It was a *crime* to toss me aside, Mr. Wainscot, I don't care *what* people tell you."

Mrs. Edgecliff filled the pot with warm water, stirred an entire carton of salt into it, then tied a precise length of string to the handle. She hefted the heavy pot over her head and balanced it gingerly on top of the pantry by the back door. The string dangled to the floor. She took a moment to catch her breath.

"It was a *crime*, Mr. Wainscot, no different from taking my purse, no different from breaking into my home. I have always been a great believer in *justice*, Mr. Wainscot. And justice demands that those who commit crimes *pay* for their atrocious acts."

She took the oven shelf, trailing its electrical cord, to the foot of the pantry; tied the dangling string to it so that one side was suspended an inch or so from the floor; and covered it carefully with a throw rug. Any weight applied to the rug—by a person's foot, for instance—would bring the pot of salt water down, dousing whoever was standing underneath as well as the throw rug and the metal oven shelf.

And salt water, as Mrs. Edgecliff remembered from the lessons she used to teach her children, was an excellent conductor of electricity. She crawled behind the oven and plugged an extension cord into the 220-volt outlet.

"Now, I know what you're thinking, Mr. Wainscot," she said, slapping the greasy behind-the-oven grit from her hands. "No, this isn't for Miss Fairchild. And no, of course it isn't for *you* either, Mr. Wainscot; I've always enjoyed your little visits, and have always held you in the highest regard . . . now, now, I don't mean to embarrass you! You are one of the very few who have been unfailingly kind to me.

"Some people, however, are just so cruel. That boy who snatched my purse. . . . I wish I could have seen his face when he opened it. It made the newspaper, you know; his death was due to an extreme allergic reaction. Not that it might have mattered—the coroner counted *ninety-eight* stings on the body. Of course, finding a wasps' nest in the city wasn't *easy*; I had to collect it the night before, when the little beasts were asleep.

"And those two who broke in and desecrated the sanctity of my home and drank my liquor right out of the bottle, right in front of me . . . of course, I would *never* have taken any more drinks out of

that bottle, the one I'd put out for them. Not after I'd crushed up some of my best crystal and put the ground glass in it. I'd like to know how long it was before they felt the first twinges of *pain*.

"And of course, there's Miss Fairchild. I took the paint chips from the windowsill right where you're sitting, Mr. Wainscot. She takes her coffee with a lot of milk and sugar; it didn't surprise me that she didn't notice the taste. I wonder how she's feeling right now . . . and what her baby will look like when it's born."

Mr. Wainscot, of course, said nothing. He simply curled his tail and licked at a ruffled patch of fur. Mrs. Edgecliff had named the stray tom after its rich coloring; it had reminded her of wood paneling.

"As I've said, I've always been a great believer in *justice*, Mr. Wainscot. Those who injure others, who kill, who cause others to suffer, deserve *punishment*. Don't you agree, Mr. Wainscot?"

Mr. Wainscot simply looked at her. She smiled.

"Of course you do."

Mrs. Edgecliff took off her shoes and stepped onto the throw rug.





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FICTION

# The Mystery of the Missing Marsupial

by Robert  
Halsted

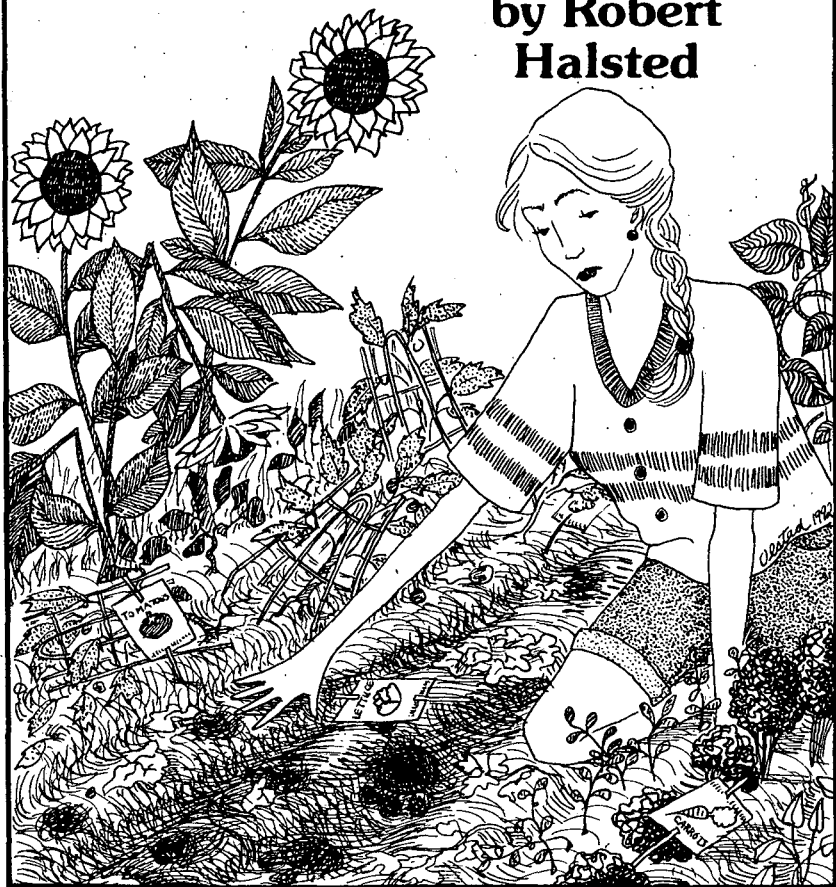


Illustration by Patricia Olstad

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““M aybe we could have an *après-hurricane* party?” Millie suggested.

I thought a moment. “Great idea, but we might get more return invitations than we could handle.”

“You mean other people are digging out of the ruins, too?”

“That’s the local custom.”

Nadya had been rough on us, though we had it relatively easy considering the people who didn’t have homes to come back to or, worse, vice versa. The cottage was still standing, and there was very little—a couple of cheap pieces of furniture and some odds and ends—that was so far gone we had to throw it out. We’d still be discovering mummified marine specimens under things for a while, but we had basic cleanup fairly well done.

“But some kind of recreational break is indicated,” I continued the thought. “How about lunch at the Burger Palace, or a *brief*, my feet are already killing me, shopping tour?”

“Great! As soon as I finish laundering our drug money.”

We’d actually, if you can imagine it, forgotten the several thousand dollars we’d rescued from a watery grave in the Gulf of Mexico until we started cleaning up. We tried to see it

less as a windfall than as a backup system. If we spent much at a time there’d be a lot of bureaucrats asking questions and grabbing percentages we didn’t really think belonged to them—Millie and I both have a healthy anarchist streak—so we put it in a hidey-hole for gradual and/or emergency use.

After Nadya, we noticed the beginnings of deterioration, so we decided on a mild bleach to kill the mildew, followed by a clearwater rinse and sun drying. Millie, who was just learning domesticity—she’d never even made her own bed till she went to college—even ironed a few bills, but it made them look too good. Slightly shabby is more anonymous.

So I pitched in, and soon we had them neatly bundled. This time we stowed them upstairs, in the back of my studio filing cabinet. Since the bundles didn’t come out even, we impulsively held back a few bills for a spending spree.

We ate a couple of notches better than the Burger Palace, at a little mom-and-pop place I’d recently discovered in Palm City called the Metropole. Their daily special might vary from Tex-Mex to Dixie grease-grits-and-gravy to something approaching Continental *haute cuisine*. Today it was a Creole

concoction on rice, and quite decent.

"Someday I'll be a culinary genius and you'll be proud of me," Millie volunteered over butterscotch pudding.

"I'm already proud of you, darling," I responded. Not out of any gallantry but because I was proud of her. I feel ennobled and ornamented by her presence. If not by her cooking, so far and mostly.

Resurfacing after following her own underground train of thought, she said, "I think the vegetable garden is most urgent."

We'd lost nearly all our young winter veggies in the storm, and this had been a crushing blow for her. I think Millie's tear ducts are hooked up wrong. She takes major disasters with a smile and weeps copiously at small, easily corrected things like having to replant. Which Florida farmers have to do two winters out of three in the normal course of events. I think she may have had a personal relationship with each plant.

"But you have to give me moral support. I'm afraid of Stetson."

"?"

"I was a morbid child. I read Eliot in college. On purpose."

"Ugh. You mean 'The corpse you planted in your garden'?

But I think we got them all. There was only ol' Bill, that we knew of, and we located him. Anybody else would be just nice neat bones by now, what with all the crabs and buzzards and things."

"Nonetheless, your moral support is required. And your strong back."

So instead of finery and baubles, we shopped for vegetable plants. We weren't the first ones to think of replanting, and it was a seller's market. The fashion and glamor stuff would have been cheaper. After tracking all over Palm City and suburbs, we found most of what we wanted in pots or six-packs for quick results, and the rest in packets to grow the slow, natural way. We got some extra to pot for replacements as needed.

My kitchen garden, though it has yet to reach the full flower of its gardenhood, so to speak, is highly superior by coastal Florida standards. On the site of the original kitchen garden for the Big House, it has been enriched over the decades with leaf rakings and grass clippings. I've put my kitchen compost there and kept the humus from leaching out by always having it planted or mulched. The storm had done it no good, but it was still fair soil, and the rain had leached out the salt

from high-tide flooding. Even the dry season was no problem, with a pump and sprinklers hooked up to a salt-free flowing well.

Thus it was with a right good will and cheerful optimism that we set about replanting. Within a couple of days we had a handsome, sizable, and recognizable veggie patch. What Millie lacked in horticultural experience she made up in enthusiasm, neatness, and a sense of procedural thoroughness. We were both proud of it.

Millie, of course, had to check every day. I half expected to catch her measuring the tomato plants or ever so carefully digging up radish seeds to see if they'd sprouted. I checked less often, having learned by experience that plant growth is more impressive seen once or twice a week instead of every morning and evening.

Before too long, our surviving peppers and tomatoes had young fruits on them, and all our seedlings were growing nicely.

Then one Tuesday morning, Millie came in fit to be tied. Just about literally. Her tears of pain approached despair, her tears of anger verged upon rage.

It would be unwise to attempt a summary, or perhaps

more fairly a translation, of what she said. I believe she would have clawed the eyes out of a culprit or even a half-decent suspect. When she simmered down to near coherence, I was able to extract the information that our new-made garden had been savaged. By then it had been looking like a real, if not quite harvestable, garden, and I too was upset. Though not to the same degree.

She took me by the hand and led me out for an eyewitness view. It really did look a mess, though my skilled gardener's eye told me that the actual loss was not as serious as it had seemed at first sight. The tomatoes and peppers were mostly flattened but basically intact, and could be restaked. Some of the Bibb lettuce and wong bok were totally missing, and others sort of two-dimensional.

Urging her to a more rational view, I quoted, "Come, let us reason together."

"Don't say 'lettuce,' it breaks my heart."

I didn't expect to find any evidence to identify the vandal or vandals. No comprehensible motive, of course, is required for vandalism, so any clues would pretty well have to be physical, and I thought I wouldn't find any.

Well, I was right and I was

wrong. There was evidence all over, but we couldn't make head nor tail of it. Literally, as it turned out.

Some of the plants were untouched, some were mashed flat, some were pulled up by the roots, others looked as if they'd been chopped or shredded. The mulch was disturbed, but not in any recognizable pattern—in places it was pushed aside in windrows, elsewhere it looked as if a great chicken had scratched it, and here and there were deep depressions that looked as if somebody had dropped a sandbag or a drunk had passed out and fallen headlong.

"Applying my deductive facilities, Whatsit—" I began.

"You mean 'faculties,' Mr. Bones."

"Whatever. If you're gonna murder the culprit, you may need to apply for an EPA permit."

"You mean . . ."

"I fear, Whatsit, that no human agency has done this deed."

"Well, if it's an animal, I'm not quite as mad as I was, but I'm still mad. What kind?"

"Well, I'm not really sure. Maybe something out of a medieval bestiary. Sometimes it ploughs, and sometimes it chops." I showed her the various kinds of damage, and we

tried to design a creature to do the job. It looked something like an elephant on swamp-buggy wheels, with sharp fangs.

She examined one of the depressions in the soft sand. "I say, Bones, is this a pugmark I see?"

"Pugmark?"

"You read about them in lion and tiger books. Maybe only big cats have pugs."

I looked at the spot. There did seem to be toe-shaped marks at the forward end of the sunken area. "Think a panther did it?"

"Why not?"

I measured the putative pugmark with my eye.

"One reason why not, Whatchername—"

"Whatsit."

"One reason why not, Whatsit, is that such a panther would have to be, at my estimate, some seven feet, or twenty-one hands, high at the shoulder. Say a little under ten meters, tip to tip, or about thirty feet. And would weigh a good eighty stone."

"How much is a stone?"

"Twelve pounds, or maybe fourteen. I forget."

"Maybe a really big Bengal tiger?"

"I sincerely hope not. Besides, I'm sure it ate some cabbage."



"And Bengal tigers eat Hindu peasants."

"Sometimes a Paki or two."

"H'm."

"Yeah."

We spent a while lining up jobs for the replanting project, but we wanted Jim Pierson to be our consulting detective on this one before we mucked up the evidence, so we didn't start yet. The *Mary Jo* was ringing, so we knew he wasn't out to sea, but we couldn't raise any hands aboard.

I had a job to get out, so I deserted Millie, who had other chores to do anyhow. We never did get hold of Jim. After supper we were both pretty tired, so we went to bed early, still intrigued and puzzled. Millie talked in her sleep, but I couldn't make any sense of it.

Next morning she was still zonked out when I woke, so I built a pot of coffee but held off breakfast.

"I had an awful nightmare," she said when she finally drifted in. "I was in Australia. I was coming back from the grocery store and this huge terrible beast was trying to catch me and steal my groceries—"

We looked at each other. It took us three or four seconds each before our cerebral computers shuffled through their card files.

"What do kang—" I began.

"Kangaroo!" she said simultaneously.

Clad in our kimonos or less, we dashed out into the chilly-enough subtropical morn bare-foot. In the slanting morning light all the tracks made sense: here was where the brute had leapt from point A to point B, that furrow was where he'd dragged his tail while munching on our greens. When we checked closely, all the stuff that was actually missing, not merely trampled, was edible foliage.

"Let's check the outback," Millie suggested.

We went round to the far edge where a low sand embankment shelters the garden from encroaching scrub and winter winds. Sure enough, there in a sandy spot was a clear-enough-to-read print of a foot nearly as long as my leg, well defined toes and all. I was glad it *wasn't* a tiger.

"Kangaroos sure do have big pugs," commented Millie.

"Gives 'em good understanding," I replied. She aimed a token kick at me with her bare, sandy foot.

Sam had been following us around, half spooked. When he sniffed the big print, he fuzzed up a bit and muttered a growl under his breath, then went back home as directly as he

could without crossing kangaroo tracks.

After standing around in awe and wonder for a while, we migrated back to the cottage and started breakfast cooking. By the time we finished the last of the toast, we figured it was time to call in our consultant, so Millie rang the *Mary Jo*. The cap'n wasn't in, but Millie told Janie we needed help tracking down a kangaroo, figuring that would bring a quick return call from Jim.

Sure enough, in half an hour or less the phone rang, and it was Jim.

"Got a message from you, but my mate musta forgot to unscramble it," he announced without ceremony.

"Nope," I answered. "What you heard is what we said."

"Boy, if you'd drink normal beer like the rest of us instead of that fancy imported stuff, maybe your brain wouldn't burn out so quick."

"Cold sober, Y'r Honor," I answered. "I got a witness, and you can see the evidence for yourself."

"I will." He rang off, abruptly as usual. I've never known the man to say goodbye.

Millie and I went to dress, knowing he'd be so driven by curiosity we'd see him in fifteen minutes or less. It was just over twelve.

We took him on a royal tour of the mysterious spoor, pointing out the evidence as we went along and saving the clear track on the far side for a final exhibit. He maintained his poker face and usual stolid silence throughout. Finally he said, "Damned if it don't look like a kangaroo."

After a major concession like that, he needed coffee, so we made another pot and sat around conferring.

"Offhand," he said at last, "I don't have a ready answer. Nothin' to do but start bird-doggin' around. Mind if I run up a phone bill?"

"Suit yourself. We'll take it out of the kangaroo reward money."

We stood around while he called, first, the local law authorities (without giving his name), then some wildlife exhibits in the area. Africa World hadn't lost a kangaroo. Nor had Tropical Park, nor Gulf Gardens. He even called a couple of circus headquarters up in Sarasota and got the same negative answer.

"There's something in the back of my mind," said Millie.

"At least we're sure it ain't in the front," retorted Jim. I no longer rose to her defense on these occasions, knowing she'd eventually make Jim pay double for any insults. For now, she

just stuck out her tongue and continued.

"Something unofficial, that isn't supposed to be there. It has a funny name. Kind of like a church or a fraternity."

A nebulous recognition stirred in the back of my own mind. Somewhere in my mental attic, as in hers, the information existed, but rather than wait another overnight for elucidation I decided to call Bill Zeeman at the *Herald-Times*. I'd got to know him when I was doing some in-house freelancing for the paper, and we would help each other out from time to time. After a couple of attempts and some waiting, I got him on the line.

"Bill, ol' buddy, I got a question. Can you tell me the name of a guy who runs a sort of illegal wild animal farm?"

"Omega. The guy's name is . . . Seeger, Ed Seeger. That help?"

"Omega! Okay, that figures. I think it does help. How can I get hold of him?"

"He's way out in the toolies, off Indian Store Road. No phone. I can give you some rough directions." Which he did.

With very little preamble we piled into Jim's car and headed onto the mainland and northward up Indian Store Road. The directions Bill had given

me weren't quite complete, but after a couple of wrong turns and asking directions we saw an odd-looking set of structures up ahead and smelt an elephanty sort of smell. I was hoping Millie wouldn't think of asking for some elephant manure to put on the garden.

We pulled up at the gate and piled out of the car. A sun-wrinkled guy with a Spanish-moss beard, somewhere between thirty-five and seventy, detached himself from a group of workers and came toward us.

"Sorry, folks, this is a workday. We'd like to be open full time, but right now we only have visitors on Sundays." He addressed himself to me, which is usual, since I was the tallest of our brigade.

"We're not exactly visitors. If you're Ed Seeger, we've come to talk with you about a problem with your animals."

Ed glanced over at Jim. Jim hasn't been a cop for twenty or thirty years, but he might as well wear a badge and uniform.

"Look, goddammit, I'm *trying* to conform. The last state guy out here, he gave me sixty days to get the pens up to code. The county man said I can do this on agricultural zoning, which is what I'm zoned. Right now I'm busting my butt just trying to keep these animals *alive*."

"But—" I began.

"And I'm trying to do it on no money at all. My savings are all gone, and I'm working on volunteer contributions. If you government people want to get involved, you might get me a grant instead of sticking sticks in the spokes."

"But—"

"Every one of these animals would be dead if it weren't for me. See that pony over there? He was starving to death when I got him. That leopard has no claws and no fangs, and he was bleeding from whip lashes. Every one of 'em has been starved and abused and abandoned—"

Millie—whose eyes, as I knew they would be, were getting shiny with unshed tears, and her tenderheartedness is one of the reasons I adore and admire her—stepped forward and said in the middle of his tirade, "Are you missing a kangaroo?"

"Yes," he answered simply. "Have you seen it?"

"He's been in our garden, I think."

"She. Where's your garden?"

"Live Oak Key."

He frowned. "I don't think that's possible."

Jim stepped in. "You wanna see the tracks?"

Ed debated with himself for a moment. "Reckon I'd better." He called out to one of the laborers and turned to go with us.

Millie was petting a scared grey burro who'd come up to us. "Her name's Betty Boop," Ed told her. "Bring her a carrot next time, and you've got a friend for life."

Getting back to the cottage was quicker and easier than the trip out. We took Ed over to the garden and showed him the tracks. He looked, and nodded, and said mostly to himself, "Gotta be her. And she loves Chinese cabbage. Night before last, you say?"

We were nearly out of coffee grounds, so I was glad when he wanted to start tracking immediately instead of having a conference first. We showed him the lay of the land—the bay to the west and south; mostly scrub, a little farming, groves and houses to the north; so we decided to look eastward.

Live Oak Key is shaped sort of like Italy, or maybe the letter L. We're at the southwestern point, the tip of the heel. The inhabited part of the island is the upright, and toward the toe is basically wilderness, part state-owned wetlands and part development-prohibited private lands with no more than a few fishing camps on it. From our side there's a rough but usable-if-you-can-find-it land bridge among the mangroves. Nestled in the center of this area is a couple of hundred

acres of surprising high and dry land, substantially unspoiled.

We figured that the animal would have been noticed if it had headed up-island and would have finished off our cabbages if it had stayed around the point. Assuming it didn't swim—and Ed was pretty sure it couldn't—it either was carried away, and no big vehicles had been by, or else it had to have headed east into the bush.

Millie did a quick change into long pants and sleeves and I put on a pair of socks, then we headed for the land bridge. When we got to a bare, sandy spot, Ed went ahead and looked close. Then he knelt down and beckoned us over. There in the sand was the same track Millie and I had seen in the garden, but clearer. It was headed eastward. "That's Susie," he said. "See that scar on the third toe?" We saw it.

I don't know whether Ed was an old bushtracker or was putting on an act for us, but he'd move on a couple of dozen paces, look around, sniff and listen, then change directions. Once he saw a dropping on the edge of the trail and said, "There's bear here," which surprised me. Another time I heard a gator gronking through a stand of cypress, and was astounded at the amount

of fresh-water habitat on our little bay island. We'd have to come here with a camera some day.

All this time we'd been going through pine, cabbage palms, cypress, and a little oak, with only the occasional white mangrove. Then we felt the woods thinning out and saw a park-like glade of savanna ahead. Ed motioned us to caution and silence, and strode ahead as we crept cautiously behind. He stopped us at the edge of the glade, then slow-motioned us forward.

We looked over and around him, and there was probably the first live kangaroo I'd ever seen (it's hard to separate childhood memories from Disney films). I was pretty impressed—the brute was nearly as tall as Millie, and far heavier in the hips. I'd say three or four hundred pounds of 'roo, as we old outbackers call them in Stryne, our native tongue.

"Well?" asked Jim in a stage whisper.

"Wrong kangaroo," said Ed.

Our jaws dropped, and we stood there, speechless.

"Just jokin', folks. It's Susie. Y'all stay back here." He went, one step at a time, out into the glade and began crooning her name like a mother trying to lure a toddler back from the edge of a high roof.

She caught sight of him, started, turned her head back toward him, and wiggled her ears comically. He took another step or two forward, held out his hand, and continued talking. Then she took a hop or two toward him, and finally they were hugging in the middle of the clearing. He whispered confidential stuff in her ear, gave her a pat on the shoulder, and came back toward us. She loped behind him for a couple of hops, then saw us and stood stock-still.

"Not gonna be easy," he said when he got back to us. "I'll get me a crew together, and maybe we can lead her out with ropes. I'll be back later today."

Jim had business to do, so Millie and I drove Ed back out to Omega, where we got a brief tour and Millie realized the dream of a lifetime by petting—cautiously—an old friendly pussycat of a tiger. We learned that he called the place Omega because it was the end of the line for its residents, a zoo of last resort. It had started with a few exotic pets people had dumped on him, and grew from there.

While we would have enjoyed watching Susie brought home, there was a consensus that the fewer strangers the better, so Millie and I set to work in the

garden, which didn't seem nearly so bad now. After lunch Ed and his crew came out with a homemade rig, a sort of mesh cage on a four-wheel trailer, and backed it as far into the woods east of the shell road as it would go. Then they set off down the trail.

No more than an hour later a four-wheel-drive pickup with state decals on the door pulled up and a big beefy guy with a real mother-banger of a rifle climbed out.

"Where's the kangaroo?" he demanded, looking through the woods at Ed's truck and trailer. I didn't get good vibes from him.

"Kangaroo?" I stalled. He just didn't feel like he was on our side, and I wanted him to go back where he came from.

"We got a report there was a dangerous kangaroo escaped down here destroying property and endangering life."

"I have no idea where any kangaroo is. We're having enough trouble with the goats," I lied.

"Goats?"

"Some idiot dumped a load of goats in our mangroves and the rancher's trying to round 'em up now." I wasn't sure whether I had him going or not.

"I'll just go check on it," the state man said, and headed toward the woods.



Millie had crept up on our blind side during this exchange. She stopped the guy in mid-stride by saying, "If you came to check on the bear, they've already taken it away."

"Bear?"

"The one they were using the goats as bait for. It was in the back of a station wagon. I don't know whether they shot it or just tranquilized it." I believe everything Millie tells me, but not some of the things she tells other people. Compulsively truthful people make fabulous liars when adequately motivated. They're used to being credible.

"When did they take it?"

"Just a little while ago. Maybe fifteen minutes."

"Did you say a station wagon?"

"Yes, a big blue one. A Ford or a Dodge, I think—a big American one. I meant to write down the license number, but I got distracted. It was four-WD-seven-something." She was looking at the chrome lettering on his fender when she said that.

He dug up our shell road turning around and zooming back north. As soon as he was out of sight, Millie and I raced into the woods to warn Ed, but they were already coming up the trail with Susie, leashed and compliant. We gave him a

quick rundown, and he decided to get off the island as quickly as he could, before the wildlife ranger or whatever he was dropped the red herring and came back for the big fish. As it happened, we haven't seen the guy to this day—I hope he's still looking for the bear poachers and leaving other people's kangaroos alone.

The next day we drove out to Omega with Jim to see if Ed had got Susie home okay. When he saw us pull up, he came to the gate with a big smile on his face and led us back to the mesh-roofed pen that was Susie's domain.

We talked to the kangaroo and then drifted around visiting the other animals while Jim conferred with Ed. Eventually Jim ran out of questions, or maybe Ed ran out of time and patience, and we headed back home.

"Drop me off at the boat," Jim said. "I got some answers to track down."

Now, I'm curious—say, intellectually curious or idly curious—but Jim is compulsively curious.

He cannot share the world with an unsolved puzzle, an unanswered question, at least where anything like a crime is concerned. So far as I cared, Susie was back home and that was

our purpose. I would always wonder how she got out of Omega, and more so how she got onto the island, but I wasn't going to let it interfere with the rest of my life.

After lunch, Millie and I got to discussing our back yard forest preserve and decided to use up some film. I loaded up with some Fujichrome 200, the fastest I care to shoot with outdoors, and took along a longish lens in case we saw a panther or something in the distance. I was sure there were none on the island, but then I would have told you there were no bears or kangaroos either.

I did mostly scenics—sweeps of beautiful Florida sky with fantasy clouds over the tree-tops, a closeup of an air plant blooming on a bald cypress, a strange ground-orchid, one twig of autumn-colored oak that must've strayed down from up North. I thought I saw a possum or coon up a tree, but it was gone by the time I got rigged up. I decided after that to leave the camera set for quick animal shots and readjust for things that would stand fairly still, like trees and skies.

We were creeping up on the eye of the cypress head (that's the pond in the middle), Millie leading the way since she's much lighter on her feet than I

am, when she gave an urgent hand signal. I tiptoed up even with her and she whispered in my ear, "It's not a gator, I don't know what it is."

I crept past her and got a glimpse of what seemed to be an otter, unless it was a beaver, which I think we don't have down here. I got two or three shots, including one in a revealing belly-up maneuver, before it submerged. After it failed to reappear for several minutes, I did some sky-and-water studies and we went on.

We were circling toward home when we came upon a delightful little glade nestled in amongst heavy woods. I was studying angles to shoot it from when I saw a jarring note—something didn't belong.

I swept my eyes slowly back over the scene, and there were some wrong trees there. They were all about the same twelve feet tall, the leaves were wrong, and the spacing was wrong—they stood at almost regular intervals in a curving line at the edge of the glade. The bark was peeling off in flakes, but they weren't gumbo-limbo and it was the wrong time of year for gumbo-limbo to peel. I walked up to one, broke off a leaf, and tasted it.

"Ugh. Eucalyptus," I said, spitting out the cough medicine-tasting leaf. Eucalyptus

grow here, but I've never seen them naturalize like some of our other imports—the notorious peppertree and the abominable cajeput. And I've never seen *any* tree naturalize in an evenly spaced curving line that didn't follow a watercourse.

I dug with my fingers around the base of the tree, then moved to a couple of the others and did the same thing.

"Behold, Whatsit," I cried to my puzzled comrade. "Perlite, vermiculite, and coarse northern peat, languishing here in the Florida sand. Unless my eyes deceive me, someone has planted exotic trees in this otherwise natural wilderness." I went on to explain the clues that had led me to this conclusion.

"Good show, Mr. Bones. Did you say eucalyptus? You were sort of expectorating as you spoke."

"Eucalyptus indeed. And why here?"

"You mean why here instead of Borneo or California or botanical gardens or wherever they're native to?"

"Aw—" I stopped myself. I'm sure my mouth hung open and my eyes widened.

"Aw, shucks?"

"No, I don't want to say it."

She got the same look of shocked insight on her face I must have had on mine. "Can't

be. Must be a coincidence. But watch out for wild Abos on the warpath anyhow."

"I'd rather not talk about it." And actually we didn't, since we were both processing the data and didn't have any results to show yet. Millie did once in a while mumble through stiff lips something like "Fair dinkum, Cobber," and once I found myself whistling "Toy Me Kangaroo Down, Boys," but we refrained from any direct references while we finished our tour and afterwards.

Next day I took the film to Russ at the One Hour Color Lab in North Palm City, and the subject sort of faded into the background as Millie and I caught up on other jobs. I had a personally referred book illustration job I was doing for a friend of a friend up North and I wanted to turn out an excellentissimo job, so I was close-reading the copy chapter by chapter as she sent it to me. For time spent, I was getting almost minimum wage, but I figured it was a good investment in more ways than one, and I was tied into royalties if it went over more than medium-small.

When I went to mail the illustrations a day or two later, I stopped back by Russ's to pick

up my slides and prints. I always shoot with a positive film and pay extra for negatives and prints, then carefully catalogue everything. Not because I'm an orderly person, but because I'm not.

"Where the hell have you been?" demanded Russ when I stepped into the shop.

"Oh, I've been tied up a couple of days on a job. I'm sorry if I held you up—I didn't know the processor was ever in a hurry."

"No, no—where were you shooting those rolls?"

"Far corner of Live Oak Key, sort of across the road from my house. Why do you ask?"

"You're lying, you crafty rascal. What d'you say about *this*?" He slapped an eight by ten print down on the counter. "I blew it up because I didn't believe it."

The enlarged detail was a little grainy and fuzzy, but you could see the otter clearly, except it did turn out to be a beaver. Except . . . when you looked closely at it it wasn't. The face was far too much like a duck's.

I've never passed out—that is, fainted—in my life, but I had a dizzy spell and actually blanked out for a moment. My computer tripped a breaker somewhere.

"Gee, Russ, what can I say?"

It must be that outdated film you sold me."

"That stuff was so fresh I wasn't supposed to sell it till two months after you bought it. Come on, I won't tell anybody."

"Russ, I promise you'll be among the first to know. Even if I have to call you at three o'clock in the morning. But first I have to find out myself. Meanwhile, could you keep mum?"

I usually jaw a while, but this time I paid up and walked out with Russ still throwing questions at me. It was all I could do to keep myself from stopping at *Mary Jo* as I passed by Shrimptown, but when I deal with Jim, I play my cards close to my chest and don't say a word till I've got five aces to open.

I shared the astonishing discovery with Millie; then we went back in the woods for eucalyptus leaves and the potting soil at the base of the trees to show Jim. "He must have come by boat," said Millie as we were filling the specimen Baggies.

"He?"

"Whoever put all these things here. I think he stole Susie, too. And I'm sure it was a he."

"I could agree, but we're not ready to bring the case to court yet. So shut up and find some evidence."

She pouted at me. "Whatever

happened to our decorous, Old-Worldly Whatsit and Bones act?"

I sneered. "You're lookin' at Mike Hammer, babe."

"Just call me Anvil, honey," she answered, wiggling.

"Later. At home. If it's too late for skeeters, it's probably no-see-um season."

I've never met such a lascivious creature as Millie. Nor had I realized what a horny old goat I am till I met her. If there were any mosquitoes I didn't feel them, and I thought idly afterward as we were dressing that no-see-ums don't show till the spring dry season. But the doggnats, till we got reclad, were a bother.

Once we were home, I called Jim. "Like to reopen the kangaroo case, tiger?"

"I never closed it. Kidnaping's a capital charge."

"Got some evidence here to astound you. It might even twitch your facial muscles."

"I don't astound easy."

"You will, buddy." This time I hung up on him for a change.

We had barely time for a quick shower before he showed up. Millie got my coffee and his beer ready; I lined up Exhibits A, B, C, and D on the dining table.

"This better be good. I'd be gettin' rich if I was billing mileage."

"Sit down. Take a sip, uh, guzzle. Now here's Exhibit A: eucalyptus leaves, from an otherwise native nature preserve on the southeast corner of Live Oak Key, Florida. Exhibit B, photo with eucalyptus trees marked, showing unnatural distribution. Exhibit C, man-made potting soil dug from base of same trees."

He thought a moment. "So somebody planted some trees there. It's strange, but there's a lot o' strange people here."

"Right here?"

"Right here. Two out o' three."

Smirking, I produced the eight by ten. "Exhibit D, enlarged detail from photograph of exotic mammal in same area."

He studied the picture. At last, ungraciously, he said, "What the hell is it?"

"Duck-billed platypus. Native to same part of the world as eucalyptus and Susie. They're rare, even there."

His face did move. I saw it with my own eyes.

"Well, I'll be damned," he finally mumbled.

We sat around a while theorizing. Millie even took notes on various possibility tracks. After this, we went to the scene of the crime with the chief detective — Jim was now in charge of the case, no longer a

mere consultant—to show him the evidence first-hand.

On our previous trip, I'd been ready to check out Millie's hunch that the perpetrator had come by boat, till we got distracted. We now looked for a trail leading toward the water from the central glade. We found a couple that curved around and petered out, and then one that led fairly straight in what we figured was about the closest access to the sound. As we tracked down it, we saw evidence of a little machete work, a couple of human male bootprints, and one we thought—but couldn't be sure—was an old Susie-print, inbound.

We found the trail too easy to be anything but what we thought it was. It stayed to high ground, was fairly straight and free of limbs to head-height, and ended up at a kind of augmented natural boat slip where a sandy channel next to a coral-rock ledge had been deepened with some kind of shovel-and-bucket work.

"Well, we know how and what, now we gotta figure out *who*," commented Jim.

We thought about it on the way home. Afterwards, as we sat at the conference table, he finished his thought. "A stake-out could be real labor-inten-

sive and time-consuming. He might only come every few weeks, for all we know."

"Maybe we could have a kind of robot stakeout," put in Millie. "You know, electric eyes and infrared cameras and stuff."

"I'm not up on the state-of-the-art," I responded, "but Russ would know what's possible. My technology is limited to a black thread across the path hooked up to a box-Brownie, but there's probably something more sophisticated." We decided for me to check with Russ first, then with electronics geniuses as required and available.

Millie and Russ hadn't seen each other since he did the processing to catch the swamp rats who assaulted her and stole her car on Alligator Alley. I encouraged her to doll herself up a bit and go into the shop ahead of me.

She did. Millie has that to-the-manor-born sort of class that can support a lot of hardware without looking outré. Or that can slouch around in a pair of ragged jeans and one of my old flannel shirts and look like she's arriving at an exclusive reception. She looks quite good in the buff, too. I've never seen a nude with more *dignity* since Fine Arts 305, Advanced Life Studio.

For this occasion, she wore a simple frock in aquamarine and beige, trimmed with touches of gold and jade, mostly my gifts over the months we'd known each other. She tucked a splash of my favorite fragrance into her irresistible décolletage, and I had my hands full keeping my hands off her.

I parked a few spaces down from Color Lab and let Millie go in before I left the car. I dawdled at a couple of windows and then went into the shop. Russ barely glanced in my direction.

"Be with you in a little while, Walt," he said over his shoulder, and went back to breathing down her cleavage. He was trying to sell her a camera, a roll of film, or mostly darkroom lessons.

I let her charm him a while longer and then spoke. "I have some news for you, Russ, if you can stop drooling down that young lady's bosom for a minute." And to her: "He's married, miss."

Russ was nonplussed. This was a total violation of code. Preferable is to stand by and let your buddy score. Barely tolerable is to move in and try to share the action. Simply Not Done is to torpedo his effort.

Hardly concealing his irritation, he asked curtly, "Like what kind of news?"

"Like, do you remember the

ugly prints you did of the assault victim back in July?"

He almost forgot my breach of manners, remembering the gruesome pix. "Ye-ah."

"Well, you've been trying to put the make on her for the last seven minutes."

He did a doubletake, mouth agape. "Well, I'll—be—damned," he finally got out, staring at her. "You're, ah, well, I mean—"

"Thank you," she said. "I think I look a lot better, too."

"I take back what I said, Walt. I still think you've got lousy taste in photo equipment, but your taste in women makes up for it."

As soon as we got settled down, I started telling him what we needed, only hinting at the why, and reassuring him that he'd get the full story soon.

"The photo stuff we can do, just for the amusement of it. I've even got some experimental polysensitive film that ought to give you a usable print day or night, though not studio quality under any circumstances."

"We just want to identify a face."

"I'd say fifty percent chance or better. With two cameras and multiple exposures, better I.D. than passport or police pictures. There will be some expense for renting electronic



stuff, but I can save you the deposit and set it up for you."

Next day but one, having kept a fitful watch meanwhile, Jim and I went to Russ for the equipment and instructions.

"The last one was better looking," said Russ, looking at Jim.

"I trust you better with this one," I retorted.

The mechanism, once organized by the experts and explained to us, was simple enough. When we got home with it, we set up an infrared eye across the trail near the boat landing. When the beam was broken, it would set off two automatic cameras set at different angles. Each would shoot, advance to the next frame, and wait for the next trip. As a bonus, Russ's electronics expert had wired in a short-range CB transmitter so we would get an audible signal at the cottage if we were home, otherwise we would check the film counter daily.

All the equipment was weatherproofed, and we set it up in such a way that only the CIA, if they knew it was there in the first place, could find it. Jim and I walked through the first two frames to test it, and it worked. We heard a slight buzzing click from the trail, and decided to scatter dry cab-

bage-palm fronds on the path at the sensor, so their crunching would mask the camera sound. That ran us up to frame four. We spent frames five and six checking the CB, and headed home.

We decided it was good policy not to actively pursue the culprit, just to monitor daily or so for film count and tracks, and watch from the point to identify the boat if he came westward, which we considered unlikely.

We spent a couple of boring days waiting for signals that never came, or following up false signals that were either animals or some kind of radio interference. The film count went slowly up, but no one used the landing. We relaxed our obsession and went back to, for us, a normalish life.

Then one day there was an unusual total quiet: the bay was flat—you could see Shell Island reflected in it—no breeze stirring, no birds, no powerboaters. Millie was hand sewing, I was reading, Sam was asleep, and the fridge had just stopped. I was about to open my mouth to comment on it when we heard a fairsized outboard a mile or so east of the point, faintly but clearly. We both listened as the motor came in, changed pitch, idled down, sped up, and then—so far as we could tell—stopped entirely.

A couple of minutes later the radio alarm sounded. "I think this is it," Millie whispered.

"Me too," I responded as quietly. I thought of calling Jim, but decided on quiet instead. Less than an hour later the CB binged again. By now the background noise had increased, but being tuned for it, we heard the outboard race, change gears, and settle into a steady cruise, headed eastward away from us.

Counting dressing time, it took us no more than ten minutes to cover the now familiar trail. The film counters had gone up two notches, and the dry sandy part of the trail showed boot tracks about a size eleven, as close as we could tell identical to the ones we'd seen earlier. Down at the slip, a scuffle of tracks—one man only—and marks of something heavy being off-loaded. Probably a bag of Purina Wombat Chow, we figured.

We were sure we had our man, but for caution we left everything in place, removed the film, and replaced it with new rolls. We needn't have bothered.

The only reason it took thirty minutes to get to Russ's shop was that the drawbridge was up. "You're lucky this stuff uses the same chemistry," he said when we rushed in with

our precious cartridges. "You get our usual one-hour service, less time off for good behavior. Come back in forty-five minutes, Walt, and meanwhile I'll show the lady how I operate in the darkroom."

"Russell!" came a voice from behind the curtain.

"Yes, dear, only joking."

We spent a couple of minutes chatting with Russ and his pretty assistant, Debbie Sue, who seemed to be Mrs. Russ or close to it, then went shopping till time for the prints to be ready.

"Got a couple of real criminal types here," he said when we returned. He handed us the prints of Jim and me. We really did look pretty rough-and-ready. "And here's some four-legged ones." There was a fierce-looking, scarred old boar I'm glad we didn't meet, and the upper half of something that *could* have been a wombat, or a fat collie, or almost anything. "But this is probably the guy you want." I think we could have recognized the character on the street from three of the four shots, two profiles and one more or less full face. He looked like the prototype for Crocodile Dundee, Aussie-type hat and all.

"Any doubts, Whatsit?"

"None at all, Bones."

"We'll bring the equipment

in tomorrow, Russ. This part of the job is done." We paid him and left.

Of course we stopped at Shrimptown on the way home. If *Mary Jo* hadn't been in, I think we'd have tried to whistle her back all the way from the Campeachy Banks.

Jim actually grinned when he saw the shots of the Aussie. And even if he didn't walk the streets of Palm City and the byways of Mosby County clad in his Professional Australian uniform, we had a good face and a close approximation of size and shape, a solid six footer in good condition. "Two steps ahead of us now," said Jim. "First track him down, then do sumpin' about it."

We had two possible leads: Ed Seeger, who might have some personal acquaintance of him without suspecting him, and Nigel Nichols, a friend of mine who belonged to the local chapter of the Commonwealth Club, a loose organization of home-counties British and ex-Colonials. We got Russ to run some extra prints through in a hurry—for a price—and headed in opposite directions.

I tracked Nigel down in his office, where he occasionally dabbles in stockbrokering under the aegis of a thirty-year-old Green Card. I showed him our mug shots.

"Oh, MacKenzie," he said immediately. "What's he done now—another drunk and disorderly, public nudity, young girls?"

"We think he used a kangaroo without permission. But this is all a very private affair, not a police matter if we can help it."

"Something he might do, yes. A bit too Australian for his own good. Known amongst his intimates as Wildman, or the Dingo Jingo. Been practicing Stryne for years, though he's been known to speak the Queen's on special occasions."

"Does he have a real name?"

"Ian. His family were too wild for the Highlands, and transported themselves Down Under a couple of generations back. Decent chap, actually, if one Makes Allowances. Used to have a pet 'roo he doted on, Judy or Sally or something totally inappropriate like that."

"You've been a great help, Nigel."

I thanked him, shook his hand, and sped on my way.

Jim had learned from Ed that the guy was named Crocodile MacKenzie and represented himself as a wild animal specialist. There was only one Ian MacKenzie in the Palm City phone book; rather than put him on guard, we were going to go straight to his house,

but Millie volunteered to put on her telephone solicitor act first. He was home, and the voice was right. Jim and I hopped in the car and were there within thirty minutes.

I half expected the Australian flag to be flying in front of the house, but it looked fairly normal from the outside. Jim knocked.

Standing in the doorway, he looked *mighty* big—not as tall as me, but a lot of muscle. I hoped he wasn't really all that violent.

"Mr. MacKenzie," began Jim, "we need to talk to you about wildlife conservation—specially kangaroos and platypuses, and that kind o' thing."

MacKenzie inflated, clouded over like a Florida thunderhead, then relaxed and opened the door wider.

"Come on in. I suppose I expected this sooner or later." His accent slowly relaxed, too, and he sounded as if he'd lived here for years.

"This isn't an official visit, Mr. MacKenzie," Jim continued. "We're just tryin' to solve a problem before it gets outa hand. Did you know you nearly got Susie shot? Wildlife officer came out with a gun, this man here barely managed to save her."

Jim had just redefined us as

allies, defusing MacKenzie's remaining antagonism. For a hardnosed ex-cop, he's a damn good diplomat when he decides to be. There was a long conversation, ranging from Australian government wildlife and Abo policy to who—if anyone—had clear title to Susie, who had apparently been truly his own pet kangaroo at one time and from whom he felt unfairly separated by a third party who dropped out of the picture before we ever got into it.

Jim, for all he comes on like a merciless son of a bitch, has a streak of humanity in him and some keen intuitions about people. Before the evening was far along, he'd arranged for a meeting between MacKenzie and Ed, and we firmed up the arrangements the next day.

The girls, of course, had to go, too, and we ended up taking two cars. The two principals started out guarded but civil; before the meeting was over they'd managed their zealotry and were talking big plans.

"What I had in mind for the Australian habitat," Ed was saying as we withdrew unnoticed, "was to take that pond down yonder, build an island in the middle with a moat all around, narrow plank walkway and a drawbridge to keep the small animals from getting off the island at night..."

"I've a bit of capital I might consider turning into a project like that. Then of course I have some initial stock, scattered about here and there . . ."

On the way back we were already looking forward to the corroboree when roundup time started in our woods.

"Just one question left," Jim broke in. "Who blew the whistle on him and nearly got Susie shot?"

We all groaned at the thought of Jim's chewing away at one more unanswered question in the Mystery of the Missing Marsupial.

"That's your project, Jim," Millie answered for all of us. "We've done our part."

\* \* \*

It was a couple of days later that the fill-dirt truck pulled up by our driveway.

"Where do you want it dumped?" the driver asked.

"Dumped?"

"This load of manure here. Mr. Seeger said you need it for your garden."


There was at least five tons dry of the stuff, or ten tons wet, which it was. Millie's eyes lit up like it was a chest of jewels, and my whole day was suddenly clouded with dread. I turned around and walked into the cottage, knowing she'd tell him to put it east of the garden patch, which would put it upwind of us for the rest of the dry season.

Which she did. And it was.



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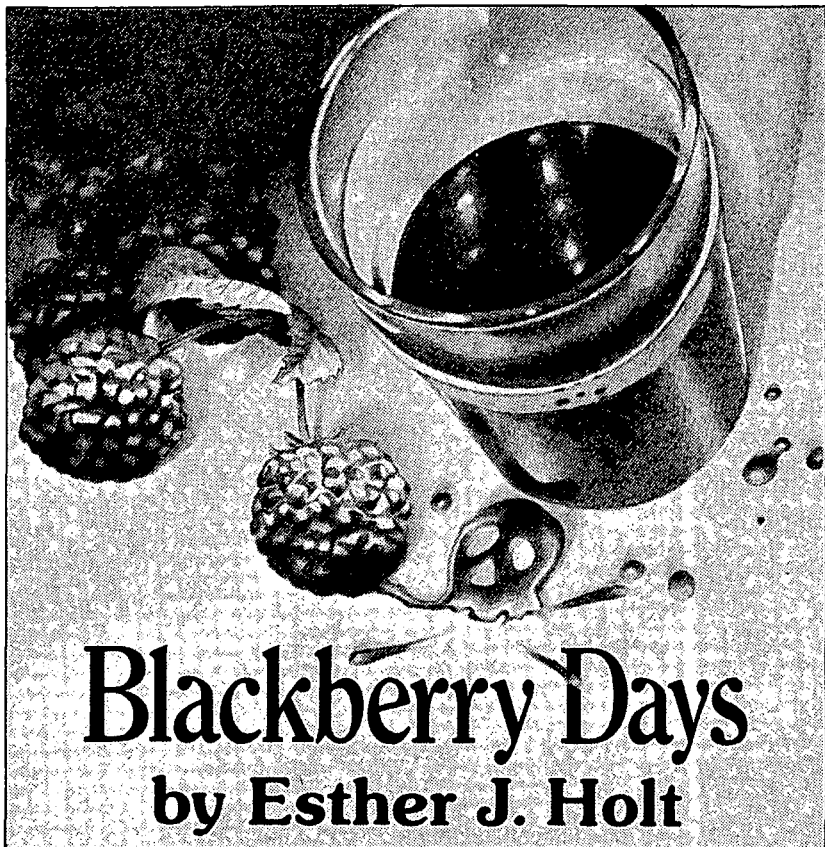
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# Blackberry Days

by Esther J. Holt

“**T**he family has decided to open the camp again,” Stella announced to Price over dinner. “And since I’m the only one not gainfully employed, the others want me to go there.”

“You’re the only one who can handle being there alone, you mean.” He was remembering the terrible discovery her brother Tyler had made. She’d always thought it was a wonder that Price had still wanted to marry her. “Can’t one of your sisters take a vacation and go with you?”

“Vacations should be fun. This is definitely not fun.” She smiled, then became serious. “No. I don’t mind. There are so many good

memories, too. When you and I would meet in the orchard and the apple blossoms would be so beautiful."

"And the grass so silky." His eyes softened.

"Yes."

For some moments, they merely sat smiling at each other.

"All right. You go see to it, and I'll come on the weekend." He got up to carry the plates to the kitchen and bring back the dessert plates with wedged cheese and apple slices. "It's a wonder the family hasn't received offers for all that land. It's well laid out, not too hilly."

"We have—through Tyler—rather his business manager. We turned them all down on the off-chance that we might want to go back." Stella poured more coffee for the two of them. Twenty years of marriage had worn their lives into one smooth routine. "Now I realize we should all go back at least once, so it's just as well we did turn down the offers—for now."

"Yes, some of—you—might have need for the money for some reason or other."

"I suppose. No one said. I gave your vote without consulting you because you always seemed so involved in your own business. Our last get-together was when you were meeting with all those money people. Did you ever get that worked out?" All Stella knew about Price's business was that it enabled them to live well, as her family had always lived.

There had never been any children for her and Price, something they never questioned. Stella felt as if she had raised three children. Tyler was too close to her age to be relying on her so much. He had once tried to look after her.

"Yes, a Japanese firm stepped in and eased the burden." He knew she didn't understand, but he went on. "We had no choice even though Mr. Pintaro refused to attend the meetings with them."

"I think I'll go next Monday morning. Mrs. Lightner will fix your meals. I'll ask her to cook the old German dishes."

"Very good. You look after me even when you're not here." He came around the table to kiss her cheek. "I'm going to watch *The Nightly Business Report*." He had VCR's set up to tape several business reports. Stella couldn't remember her father's getting that involved with television. Maybe all those programs hadn't been on then.

Wanting to get an early start Monday morning, Stella was ready

before Price had to leave for the office. He put her suitcase in the trunk of her small car and watched her drive out of the underground garage. At the last minute she waved, reassuring him, but couldn't take time to see whether he waved back. She was out in traffic. He'd kept talking about what she was facing alone.

The farm had been in the Showers family for generations dating back to the 1800's. Stella's father was the first to break away from the land and make his fortune in the city. Selling off the animals and large equipment, he had kept the farm for a summer home. The servants were left behind in the city. Each member of the family had his or her own chores to do.

Stella's had been helping with the meals.

"It was the best of times." It was. She clutched the steering wheel, remembering the entire quote from Dickens' *A Tale of Two Cities*, the dark line drawn under the first six words. She remembered the other words, too. "When you go, I go."

Mother would say that, looking at Father as if no one else existed. Was it any wonder the children all gathered to Stella?

Knowing their strong feelings for one another, it shouldn't have been such a shock finding their parents together that way, but it was. Mother had seemed to be holding onto life with all her might. Tyler said it: "I thought instead of going with him, she'd make him stay here."

They never did sort out the exact arrangement of what had taken place. They only knew that Mother and Father had both disappeared about the same time in the early afternoon. Not unusual for them, but when they didn't return for dinner, someone—maybe Price, who'd been invited to eat with them—suggested they might still be in their room. They had all had a tiring morning picking blackberries. After lunch they had all formed their own groups.

Some protective instinct had led Tyler to go first to the large bedroom. He couldn't stop the five other people from pushing into the room, seeing the nearly empty glasses of blackberry juice.

Stella pulled off at a rest stop and sat there, quivering. Was she really ready for this? Shouldn't she have brought someone? Not Price. Someone who'd felt as she had that day. He'd been concerned only because of his feelings for her. There had been no warmth between him and her parents.

She'd lied to Price. Not everyone in the family was busy. Any one of her sisters could have come with her. She'd taken advantage of her leadership to say she'd go alone. No one had argued the

point. If she'd asked someone, there'd have been hesitations and delays until she'd have gone alone anyhow.

Starting out again, Stella turned off the air conditioning and opened her window. The two-lane blacktop wound through acres that had been turned from sprawling farms and woodlots to sun-burned housing developments. Only here and there did she drive through real stands of trees.

The woodland had a powerful odor all its own, the sharpness of decaying plant matter, pines, sun-warmed oaks, and something sweet.

The blackberries were ripe. She'd almost forgotten what time of year it was.

I had to see to the teens.

Price, wanting to marry her immediately, to help with the younger ones, pressing her.

I couldn't start our married life making him responsible for three teenage girls and a twenty-year-old boy. I had to see them settled.

At a roadside stand she stopped for a glass of buttermilk and a tomato sandwich on homemade bread. The girls running the stand said their grandmother baked the bread—twenty loaves at a baking. Relieved that not all the family farms were gone, Stella bought some tomatoes and a loaf of bread.

As she continued on, the smells of fresh food filled the car. Life goes on, weaving in and out, she decided.

She had baked bread, happily satisfied with all her chores, until Price had wandered over from the Paget farm. He was a graduate student, business major, doing office work on his cousin's commercial farm. After that first meeting, she'd wanted to spend every minute with him, the rest of her life.

Did all that happen in one summer?

No, he was there for a few weeks the second summer. She'd seen him in the city over the winter when she dared invite him for weekends. Father was encouraging her to meet other people from their own circle.

What was their circle, really?

The nearer Stella got to their section of farmland, the more she was surprised by the growth of the population. Only around the grown-over farm was there still good forest, and it was filled with cabins, small trailers, and even an old bus. All side by side. People in the city had more privacy than those camp dwellers.

Stella was glad their farm buildings were back a lane, away

from the edge of the road. She wouldn't have to look at the camps.

Driving in the shaded lane, she got a whiff of dead-ripe blackberries. Someone should be picking them. It was a shame to let them go to waste. But not she. No, she couldn't pick them. She couldn't stand the thought of touching their silky ripe fullness.

It had been such fun, all of them picking together, calling back and forth. Dumping the berries all together, squeezing them through a jelly cloth. Father teasing them about the next step being to cook the juice into jelly.

Then, while the sweetened juice chilled, Mother taking her aside. The "little talk" they'd had about Price. He just wouldn't work out—their friends. Father had said . . . She was so young. Father wanted . . .

Father wanted what they both wanted. When he spoke in private to Stella it was "Mother thinks . . . Mother wants . . ." Neither of them had the courage to look her in the face and say what *they* wanted. Nevertheless, they exercised strong control over their children.

Stella had somehow gotten Price away from the teens and told him. They'd huddled together, there in the old toolshed, sneezing from the dust while she cried against his T-shirt front. He'd alternated between sneezing and muttering, "There, there," until she became hysterical with laughter. They'd stumbled, laughing, out of the shed, almost knocking Father off his feet.

He'd immediately begun to protest about such goings-on, especially in front of her three teenage sisters.

"Oh, don't worry, Father," she'd choked out. "There's no dust on my back."

Then, because the other invited him, Price stayed to share their lunch of tomato sandwiches and blackberry juice, fresh and cold. Stella became the clown, making the teens laugh so hard they nearly fell off their chairs. Tyler, she remembered, was above such silliness.

For his part, Price was neither supplicant nor injured party. He was merely Price, acting as if he belonged there. There would be no uproar that day.

Then why?

Stella pulled in next to the weathered gray barn and stopped. She looked at her hands on the wheel and let them slide off. She'd blotted out the questioning by the police, Tyler's calling the family lawyers.

The scene around her was like a familiar painting with dust blurring the sharp edges. Trees were larger, bushes had blown into full-size. The only thing remaining the same was the lawn. Someone had cut a good-sized patch around the house and out to the barn. The shed where she and Price had hidden was gone.

She wondered how much the others remembered of that day. At family gatherings, something they continued to need, someone might say, "Wasn't it a perfect morning?" No one mentioned the afternoon.

I was twenty-two, but they held me to them like they did the teens. If they could see how well Price turned out—what a success he is. And it wasn't from my money either. Why that day? It was such a perfect day . . .

Her sisters and Tyler had shown the dreadful scene in their eyes for a very long time. They wondered if they had really been such bad children. She couldn't risk saying aloud that she and Price might have been the problem. If the words were said, hung out to air, the guilt would have destroyed her.

As she climbed wearily from the car and started toward the house, she could hear children's voices coming from the direction of the camps. Odd, the only noise they used to hear was made by themselves.

She spied the familiar car sitting in the shelter of the sagging garage. Now she wouldn't be alone. Still, her hands trembled as she reached for the screen door and stepped inside. She'd expected layers of dust and festoons of cobwebs. The old kitchen was as clean as if the family was still there. She listened to the emptiness. It was like coming home from a funeral.

Surely he can't be out picking blackberries. Not today!

She moved from table to cabinets to the hall doorway, weaving from one to the other until she was in the living room. Looking at the shelf full of board game boxes, she expected to hear young voices shouting, "Come on, Stell! It's game time!"

The shelves of books, part paperbacks, many hardbacks. Probably the paperbacks would fall apart if she picked them up. Someone reading, "Hey, listen to this."

Mother doing needlework, Father reading, so involved they'd barely acknowledge the request for an audience.

Reading! They never read fiction. Father's only reality was in facts and figures. Fiction meant nothing to him. If Mother looked at a book, it had to have pictures of faraway places.



Neither of them would have been familiar enough with fiction to pick out lines like "It was the best of times." Someone else . . . why would Mother and Father have picked that day? Father meant to protect me at all costs from what he thought was a terrible error in judgment. Giving up was leaving us all to the wolves, especially the teens.

Stella felt her legs give way. She landed on the edge of the battered plaid couch. All those books. They'd brought them from home, along with the games. How was it the field mice hadn't discovered this place?

The back screen door slammed loosely. Stella jumped up from the couch, the sudden movement causing flashes in front of her eyes. She'd gone halfway across the linoleum floor before her vision cleared. She entered the kitchen as she had left it, touching each piece of furniture in her path.

"You're here. Good." He set the large bucket of blackberries in the enameled sink.

"You never let on you were coming. How did you get here so fast?" The sweet smell of blackberries was almost too much. Still, she went close enough to kiss his cheek.

"The four-lane. I assumed you'd come the old road because it was familiar to you." He stood there at ease but looking all wrong in faded jeans and T-shirt. She was more used to his tailored suits. "I brought some food. Did you?"

"Only tomatoes and fresh-baked bread. What I was hungry for at the time." She laughed, freed by his presence. "I also thought I'd be up to my ears in dust bunnies."

"I've had people looking after the house these past years. They took care of the dust bunnies. It doesn't bother them that . . ."

It was as if someone had said, "It was such a lovely morning." They both stopped smiling.

She shook her head. "Why did you pick blackberries?"

"Habit, I guess. I can throw them out, or give them to some of the campers." He reached for the bucket.

"Half the sweetness comes from the working for them. We'll keep these. Remember eating them with milk and sugar on them?"

"And you made pies."

"Which disappeared as fast as I could make them. Let's make juice." It was taking a walk directly into pain.

"Are you sure?" He had always been protective. Mother and Father probably never noticed that side of him.



"Yes. Why am I here if not to clean the house?"

"You *were* to see to the cleaning, but then I asked the caretakers and they said yes. The others are coming for the weekend. Or don't you want to stay that long?"

"I'll stay."

They worked together cleaning and sieving the berries, collecting the juice in a wide-mouthed pitcher. Their hands became stained. Stella knew even her hair would smell of blackberries. They made enough to satisfy their sudden thirst for the wild flavor. Maybe it was a form of exorcism, she thought.

Looking at the agile male hands gathering the last of the blackberry dregs, Stella was back on that last happy day. The teens had wanted to go swimming, which meant she and Price would have to go, too, and play lifeguard at the pond. The girls swam well. Stella knew the lifeguard was there to keep away any local boys.

Tyler was a terrible lifeguard. He'd take a book and become so absorbed in it he'd never have heard the girls if they'd all screamed at once, or if half the boys in the township had come to swim.

Stella looked at her own stained hands, taking sugar with a scoop from the new bag her companion had brought. Everything she should be feeling had gone inside and hidden.

"Why did you do it, Tyler?"

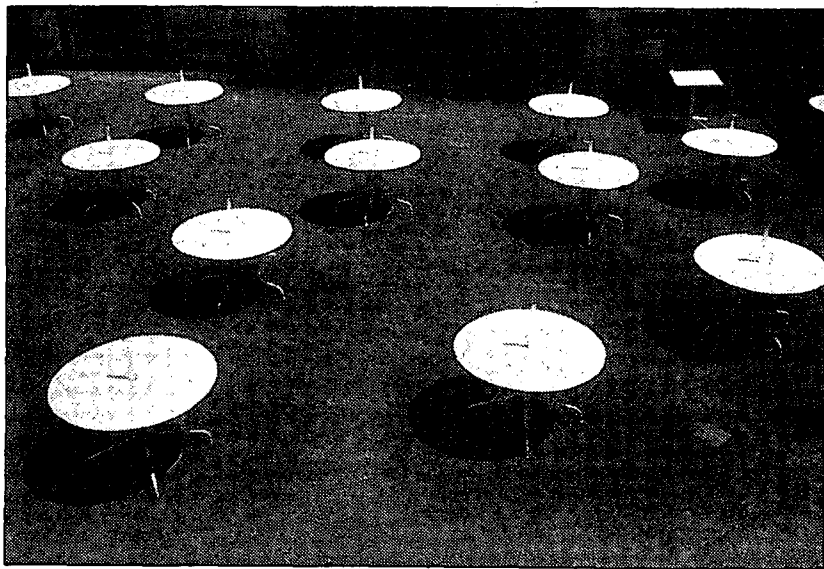
He stood shoulder to shoulder at the sink with her. Someday—if he didn't answer—someone would find them—a museum display of a couple at work in an antique kitchen.

"They wouldn't let go. They knew I wanted to be a doctor, but they'd wormed around until they had me headed for business. And you. They'd never've let you have Price. Anyone could see what a good man he was. So . . ." His shoulder went up and down against hers. "They thought I was being my usual thoughtful self. And they did go together."

Stella turned to put the sugar bag into the cannister and close the lid. She picked up the pitcher of dark red liquid and carried it to the refrigerator.

"This should be well chilled by dinnertime. Let's go for a walk, shall we? Back around the pond. I want to see the whole place. Remind me of the good times, Tyler, so that when the girls get here Friday night we can have a happy place for them."

# THE MYSTERIOUS PHOTOGRAPH



*Henri Silberman. N.Y.C.*

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The winning entry for the March Mysterious Photograph contest will be found on page 155.

FICTION

# Who Killed Him in Misty?

by David Braly



Illustration by Ron Chironna

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**P**hilip Fulkerson kicked her again and again. The blows struck her stomach, neck, and legs. He kicked her until a voice inside his head said, *If you're not careful you're gonna kill her.* That stopped him.

He looked down at Sandra. She was rolled up in a fetal position, bawling. What had happened? He tried to remember. He'd hit her. Several times. Lost his temper again.

Fulkerson turned, walked to the door. When he reached it, he looked back at her.

"I don't guess we'd better have dinner," he said. "Uh, I'm sorry. I didn't mean . . . but you shouldn't oughtta talk back. I mean, I've been drinking and . . . I'm sorry. I'll see you tomorrow."

Fulkerson went out onto the plank terrace. Hardly any light illuminated the wet outside stairs. Vegetation blocked the light from the houses across the street. He pulled his coat collar tight against the rain, then gingerly descended the boardinghouse stairs while holding tight to the rail. Putting his feet on solid ground again was a relief. After a quick glance at the lighted window of Sandra Young's room, Fulkerson started across the wet blacktop parking lot to his Toyota.

While inserting his key into

the Toyota's door lock, he heard someone hurrying up behind him. Fulkerson never found out who. That was because whoever it was fired two bullets into his back.

**V**ictor Nace found Sandra Young at the county seat rather than at Misty, where the murder had occurred. Misty's jail was for men only. The bigger jail at the county seat had a women's facility. Danton Waxler, Sandra's lawyer and the man who'd hired Nace, had not told him that. Nace had made a wasted trip to Misty before he got a chance to talk to Sandra.

She was a dishwater blonde who looked pretty even in the orange jail coveralls that she wore into the visitor's room. She sat on one side of the table, Nace on the other. A jail matron watched them from the table's end, pretending to pay no attention to their conversation. But she was close enough to hear every word.

"How often did Fulkerson come to your room for dinner?" asked the private detective after Sandra had given him her account of the night of the murder.

"Four, maybe five times a week," said Sandra. "I had a stove. It was the only room in

the boardinghouse with its own stove, except for the manager's."

"Did he always come at about the same time of evening? In other words, was there an established pattern?"

"He usually came between seven and seven thirty."

Nace jotted this information down in his notebook. Sandra said something he didn't hear. When he finished writing, he asked her what she'd said.

"I said we were gonna be married and they didn't even let me attend his funeral. Mr. Nace, I didn't kill him. I could never kill him. He'd beaten me up before. He was just drunk. He just had a habit of losing his temper when he got drunk. I can't believe they think I killed him. I loved him."

Waxler had warned Nace about the young woman's lack of self-esteem. Nace hadn't thought much about it. Now he did. It made no sense for a woman as pretty and nice as Sandra Young to lack self-esteem. Still, he'd seen it before. As a police officer in Los Angeles and Portland, as a private detective operating out of Portland, he'd met hundreds of men and women who allowed other people to bully them, intimidate them, control them. He knew it existed. He still could not understand it.

"Did Fulkerson have any enemies?" Nace asked her.

"I've thought about that a lot since my arrest. Phil had four enemies that I know of. Everett Wolcott of Wolcott Logging was the worst. He'd fired Phil after Phil beat up Andrew Farr. Phil told Wolcott that he would get even, that he had information that would send Wolcott to the federal pen. Wolcott said that if Phil ever hurt him, he'd kill him."

Nace jotted down this information. He remembered Waxler's telling him that Fulkerson was an unemployed timber faller. Now he knew how he came to be unemployed.

"I take it that Andrew Farr is another enemy," said Nace.

"Yeah. He's the federal archaeologist for the Santiam National Forest. Phil beat him up when he was drunk. Farr had threatened to have Phil arrested for collecting arrowheads in the forest, which is illegal. Phil told me that Farr himself has a huge arrowhead and Indian relics collection."

Nace smiled while he wrote this down. He'd read in newspaper articles accusations that federal archaeologists complained about amateur arrowhead hunters while they themselves accumulated huge private relics collections. Although these collections were

illegal, federal investigators allegedly never pursued Forest Service or Bureau of Land Management employees the way they did civilians.

"Leland Brooke was another man Phil beat up," continued Sandra. "He's a child psychologist who lives in a house outside Misty but who practices at a clinic in Eugene. Phil was drunk when Brooke started mouthing off in the barber shop about preserving old growth timber. Brooke is the leader of a local gang of preservationists. Phil put the creep in the hospital for a good long time. Wolcott gave Phil a raise because of that."

"Why did Wolcott fire Fulkerson?"

"Because of Farr. It was one thing to punish a preservationist, quite another to beat up a Forest Service employee. The sawmills around here buy most of their timber from the Forest Service. Wolcott hauls for those mills. If the Forest Service wanted to, they could put pressure on mill owners to stop using Wolcott trucks. If Wolcott kept a man on the payroll who'd beaten up one of their own, they mighta done that."

"Who was the fourth enemy?"

"Stephen Packard. He's the Forest Service law enforcement officer. Packard was preparing

the Farr case against Phil. The government intended to prosecute Phil for assault and battery on a federal employee."

After leaving Sandra, Nace drove to Misty. It was wedged between the Santiam National Forest and the timbered foothills of the Cascades. With thirty-five hundred people, Misty had no building taller than three stories except the sawmill, whose steam rose above the town even during the steady, heavy rain. It was a dirty, dilapidated old mill town. The houses were ordinary—dull squares and rectangles—most in need of paint or shingles or both. At least a quarter of them sported "For Sale" signs on their scrubby little lawns, the result of an economy depressed by mill and logging cutbacks following the government's decision to reduce timber sales in response to environmentalist lobbying. The commercial buildings were plain, often downright ugly. Many bore signs reading "For Sale" or "For Lease" or "Space Available." People in drab clothes hurried through the rain over cracked sidewalks or drove their mud-splattered pickups down the potholed streets. Nace found the town's only hotel, a rundown two story brick building called the Misty Inn, and registered. The room

was old and threadbare but clean, with a bathroom at the end of the hall.

The first man Nace interviewed was the last one Saundra had named. Stephen Packard was a husky five ten with thick brown hair cut short. About thirty years old, he wore a khaki shirt and brown pants. He invited Nace to sit opposite him as he seated himself behind a small desk in his cubicle inside the Santiam National Forest Headquarters building in Misty.

"I've no alibi," conceded Packard. "I was working here, alone, the night Fulkerson was killed. An important arson case was coming up that I had to finish the paperwork on. But I had no reason to kill him."

Responding to Nace's questions, Packard quickly confirmed Saundra's statements about archaeologist Andrew Farr and environmentalist Leland Brooke. He hadn't known about Fulkerson's threat to put Wolcott in prison for a federal crime.

"What type of crime could a logger like Wolcott commit?" asked Nace.

"All the standard crimes businessmen commit, plus a few more that only logging company owners would be able to bring off. Tax evasion, insurance fraud, illegal use of Social

Security or Workmen's Compensation funds kept in his withholding accounts, inadequate crews on a logging site, inadequate equipment on a logging site, inadequate fire protection at a logging site, use of restricted roads, theft of timber, faulty scaling, inadequate safety precautions . . . I mean, the list could go on forever. Tax evasion would be the most damaging."

"Whatever Fulkerson had on Wolcott would have to be knowledge that a timber faller could find out about his employer. That rules out tax evasion."

"Right. It would be something happening in the forest." Packard chuckled. "Perhaps Fulkerson discovered that Everett Wolcott had been collecting arrowheads and threatened to inform Andy."

**A**ndrew Farr was two hundred pounds on a five foot nine inch frame, narrow-shouldered, a huge belly. Blue, squinting eyes looked out from a round, pale, puffy-lipped face. He wore a heavy flannel shirt that hung loose over his prefaded bluejeans.

"I'd received an anonymous tip that Fulkerson was collecting arrowheads," Farr told Nace. "I phoned him, asked



him to drop by. When he asked why, I told him that I had received information that he was violating the Archaeological Resources Protection Act of 1979, which if true could put him in the federal penitentiary and make him eligible for a twenty thousand dollar fine. Fulkerson said that I had bad information, said that he collected his arrowheads only on state lands, said that I should mind my own business. Then he hung up on me."

"When did he attack you?"

"A few days later. I dropped in at the Mountainview Tavern after work for a couple of beers. He just walked up and lit into me."

Farr described the fight in detail.

It quickly became apparent to Nace that what had happened had not really been a fight. It was too one-sided for that. The drunken timber faller had slugged, kicked, and stomped Farr. When it was over, Farr was admitted to the Adams County District Hospital with a broken nose, a dislocated jaw, a dislocated shoulder, and four cracked ribs.

"We would've gotten a conviction for that," said Farr. "But not for the arrowheads. I hate arrowhead hunters. But it's almost impossible to prove where their collections come

from. When we do prosecute, defense lawyers often fool the jury by calling our own employees to the stand and forcing them to admit that they have Native American artifact collections."

"I'm told that you yourself have an impressive private collection of Indian relics."

"That's different. I'm a professional archaeologist. And I work for the government. Amateur collectors just don't recognize the difference. They're as bad as the Native Americans who claim digging up burial grounds is a bad thing even when professional archaeologists do it."

Nace's sympathies were entirely with the Indians on that issue, but he kept his opinion to himself. His job was to ask questions, not debate.

"Where were you when Fulkerson was killed?" asked Nace.

"My wife and I were having dinner at the Waterside Restaurant and Lounge at about that time. Greg Compton—the Santiam National Forest supervisor—saw us arriving as he and his party were leaving."

"How far is the restaurant from the boardinghouse where Saundra Young lives?"

Farr shrugged. "A mile, I guess. It's on the McKenzie River, on the west side of town. The boardinghouse is near the

center, not far from the business district."

Could Farr have ducked out of the restaurant unnoticed long enough to have killed Fulkerson? Possibly. Unlikely, though. Although the killer could know what time Fulkerson would arrive at the boardinghouse—he'd established a habit—no one could know that he would beat Saundra up and leave early. The killer had waited for him to leave.

**E**verett Wolcott was out of town, Leland Brooke not home. Nace used the free time to examine the murder scene.

The boardinghouse was in the rundown area of the rundown town. Two stories tall, with peeling paint and a sagging roof, it consisted of four apartments downstairs and four upstairs. The upstairs rooms were reached by outside stairs. A "lawn" of weeds and spots of grass occupied the six feet between the house and the street it faced. To the rear was the blacktop parking lot, small and cracked and potholed. On the right was a narrow driveway that led from the street to the parking lot. On the left was a row of lilac bushes, then a side street. Probably the killer had parked on the side street, hiding behind the lilacs until

Fulkerson came down from Saundra's apartment. Bushes and trees and fences—invariably leaning, with peeling paint—protected the surrounding houses from the sight and sound of the boardinghouse. A family named Buckley, however, confirmed what the boardinghouse manager had told Misty Police Chief Zach Mathias: after the two gunshots, a car had started up and driven off. No one saw the car, but at least four people heard it. Mathias hadn't thought it important.

When Nace phoned, Florence Brooke told him that her husband would return from Eugene shortly. Nace drove out to the rustic house the Brookes owned two miles east of Misty. Before he could knock, the door opened and Florence Brooke invited him in.

"Leland isn't home yet, but I expect him momentarily," she said. "Let me take your coat."

They sat in armchairs facing the fireplace. Nace enjoyed the warmth of the fire after spending so much time in the rain. Florence Brooke was a tall, slender woman in her thirties whose long brown hair was tied into two belt-length puppy tails.

"I'm sorry Leland is late," said Florence. "Usually he's through with his patients by

three and back here before four. But sometimes he has to work late. As you probably know, he works at a clinic in Eugene and commutes back and forth four days a week."

"Was he born here?" Nace could think of no other reason for a person who worked in Eugene to live in Misty.

"He prefers this area to Eugene. Oh yes, I know, Eugene is always ranked one of America's most livable cities by magazines, but Leland hates to live around people. He prefers country life.

"Earlier, he practiced at hospitals in San Diego and Medford. His father was a milkman and—"

A boy who appeared to be about four came into the room from a door opposite the front door. Big black eyes looked out at Nace from beneath shaggy black hair.

"Didn't I tell you to stay with your sister?" demanded Florence. "Well? Didn't I?"

The boy said something in a high-pitched child's voice that Nace couldn't understand. Apparently Florence did.

"Get them and go back to your room," she snapped.

The boy walked over to a corner, gathered his Tinker Toys into their cylindrical box, disappeared through the door he'd come in from.

"You've got two kids?" asked Nace, to be conversational.

"Yes. Leland Junior is four, and Mattie's two. Leland also has a son by his third marriage; I forget the boy's age."

Florence disappeared into the kitchen for a few minutes. When she returned, she carried two cups of coffee. She handed one to Nace. At that moment she noticed that Junior had returned to the living room and was watching them.

"I told you to go back to your room," said Florence.

"Don't wanna."

"Do it!"

"No!" yelled the child.

"Do you want a smack in the mouth?"

The boy beat a quick retreat.

Florence seated herself. "Sorry about that," she said. "That brat gives me a hard time late every afternoon. It's as regular as clockwork."

A few minutes later a car drove up to the house, stopped, cut its engine. Another minute passed, then the front door opened. Leland Brooke, Sr., was in his late thirties, five seven, one hundred forty pounds. He was dark-complexioned, with black hair and beard, and his black eyes peered at Nace through little granny glasses. Florence returned to the kitchen while Leland took her chair by the fire-

place. After small talk, Brooke related his experience of the late Philip Fulkerson.

"I'd gotten a nice little debate going in Jim's barber shop," said Brooke. "Of course they were all against me. They're all such troglodytes around here. Anyway, Fulkerson came in while one of the men was talking. He sat down to wait his turn. I hardly noticed him. I'd seen him in town a few times but didn't know his name or anything about him."

"Including that he was a timber faller?"

Brooke nodded. "But that shouldn't have made a difference. Timber fallers have heard me talk before. None agree with me, but the worst I'd encountered was a shoving or threat. Usually they just argued back at me."

Brooke removed his glasses, held them out from his face toward the fire as though examining them for fog or grime, replaced them on his nose.

"When I spoke again, Fulkerson took an interest in what I was saying. He stared at me with this simply incredible hostility. I became apprehensive."

"But continued to talk?" said Nace.

Brooke raised his chin a bit. "Certainly," he said. "No one's going to intimidate me."

"What happened?"

"After a minute, Fulkerson started calling me these simply horrible names. Even accused me of being a Communist, as if anybody still accuses anyone else of being a Communist. He jumped up, yelling, screaming at me. My efforts to calm him only inflamed him further. I smelled whisky on his breath. Cheap whisky, I might add. At that point I knew there would be violence, and that's exactly the moment he socked me in the mouth."

Brooke described the fight. Fulkerson had hit him with everything he had: fists, elbows, knees, feet, and spit. By the time Fulkerson was finished slugging, hitting, and stomping, Brooke had a broken jaw, a broken nose, six teeth missing, another four teeth loose, two broken and four cracked ribs, a punctured lung, a broken arm, and a badly sprained ankle. Fulkerson had spent the night in jail, but a Misty jury had later declared him not guilty of assault and battery by reason of mutual combat.

Brooke rose from his armchair. He lifted a poker, stirred the blackened burning wood in the fireplace. It blazed up. He replaced the poker, sat down again.

"Fulkerson was telling people that he would do more of the same to me if he ever saw

me again," said Brooke. "I was thinking of buying one of those dreadful handguns when I received the welcome news that Mr. Philip Fulkerson no longer graced our earth with his presence."

"You sound pleased," observed Nace.

"Pleased? I'm absolutely delighted. Thrilled. He got his just deserts. Whoever executed that felon has my undying gratitude. I've never hated anyone in my life as much as I hated that filthy, lowlife, drunken logger."

"Not even mill owners?"

"Nuts to the mill owners, but none of them ever did me the harm Fulkerson did. And nothing I could do about it. Thanks to that jury. But I'll get back at them when we win the old growth struggle. I'll get back at everyone. The mills will shut down, the local yahoos will go on the cheese line where they belong, and Misty and every stinking little town like it will give up the ghost."

"Your wife told me that you liked small towns," said Nace.

"Some of them. But not if they have industry. Industry is pollution. The worst thing that ever happened to America was the Industrial Revolution. If we'd remained an agricultural country, we'd be a lot better off."

Nace restrained himself. Only barely. He could understand why Brooke was unpopular in a mill town. Brooke would probably be unpopular anywhere in America. But that had given Fulkerson no license to beat up on him.

"Where were you when Fulkerson died?" asked Nace.

"Driving home from Eugene. I was later than usual, even for a night when I worked late. The moment I got home Florence jumped me for it. We had quite a fight. Verbal, of course."

Broke went on to explain how he had been working late preparing for a session the following morning with a severely disturbed boy. No witnesses could verify what time he left the clinic or Eugene. Only his wife and children could verify what time he'd returned home.

Nace called Wolcott Logging twice the following morning. Each time he was told that Everett Wolcott was still in San Francisco. He called again at two fifteen that afternoon. This time he was put through to Wolcott. After Nace stated his business, Wolcott told him to drive over to the company headquarters.

Wolcott Logging's office was in a rustic, thousand square foot building near its truck

yard, which was close to the sawmill. A slat fence enclosed the entire property. Inside the fence were the office building, truck yard, machine shops, and truck maintenance garage. Nace parked his car facing a huge log in front of the office building where the other cars were diagonally parked.

Everett Wolcott was in the outer office talking to his secretary when Nace entered. The logger broke off his conversation and showed Nace into his own office. It was a small corner room, with windows looking out on the machine shops and the area where the trucks were parked. Dominated by Wolcott's table-sized desk with a model log truck where a nameplate would normally be, the office was crammed with file cabinets. Forest Service maps papered its walls. Nace seated himself in one of three old swivel chairs that faced the desk while Wolcott seated himself behind the desk.

Fat, with heavy jowls and brows, Wolcott had black-streaked iron gray hair, gray eyes, and large ears. He was perhaps fifty to fifty-three years old. He wore an old snap-button shirt, bluejeans, and logger's boots. A battered yellow cap lettered SHELL rested on a corner of the desk.

"Phil came to work for me as

a timber faller in 1985," said Wolcott. "He did an adequate job. I fired him after he beat up a Forest Service archaeologist. I don't need trouble with the Forest Service."

"What type of man was Fulkerson?"

Wolcott thought for a minute. He made several faces while thinking, to show that he was thinking hard about Nace's question and not just sitting there ignoring it.

"Well, I guess what stands out in my mind about Phil is that he was a mean drunk. That's unfair in a way. I mean that personally I saw the man drunk only twice. In other ways he was normal. Just a regular Joe. A timber faller like ten thousand other timber fallers. He made friends easily. The trouble was that when he got drunk he also made enemies easily. I'd heard about him picking fights. It never bothered me until he beat up that Forest Service employee."

"What about when he attacked Leland Brooke?"

A smile spread across Wolcott's face. "If I'd run into Brooke when I was drunk, I mighta done the same thing myself."

"I heard that you gave him a raise soon afterward."

Wolcott smiled, didn't answer.

"But Farr was different?" said Nace.

"Who? Oh, the archaeologist. Yeah. The Forest Service could make real trouble if they wanted to. You know how these government agencies can cause problems for contractors they dislike. All they gotta do is insist on the letter of the contract being adhered to. Normally that ain't done. Not every little petty thing that's in it."

"Do you collect arrowheads or other Indian relics?"

Wolcott chuckled. He shook his head.

"What was your own relationship with Fulkerson?" asked Nace.

"Employer-employee. We didn't socialize. I probably spoke to him twice a week, mostly to say hello."

"Never went to his house?"

"I don't even know where it is."

"He never went to yours?"

Wolcott shook his head.

"Never had a beer with him?"

"Oh, sure. You know how it is in a small town. We ran into each other at the Mountainview Tavern and other bars. It happened rarely, but it happened."

Wolcott glanced at his wrist-watch. Probably a signal to Nace to leave. Not yet, thought Nace.

"I've been told that when you fired him, Fulkerson threatened to reveal damaging information about you," said Nace.

"I've heard the same thing. It's crap. He never threatened me. What could he have revealed? I'm honest. I've always been honest, will always be honest. Ask anyone in this county. I've got a good reputation. A reputation I've worked long and hard to achieve. The only person who says that Fulkerson claimed to have made that threat is the woman who's now sitting in jail charged with his murder. Not exactly a credible witness. Nor a disinterested one."

"Do you know her?"

"Saundra Young? I've spoken to her a few times when she waited on my table at the Wigwam. I've never spoken to her other than that, except perhaps once or twice on the street. I certainly have never had an extended conversation with the girl. A minute was about the longest we ever spoke."

Wolcott opened his top desk drawer, removed a pack of Camels. He extended them to Nace, who shook his head. Wolcott tapped one out, put it between his lips, lit it with a lighter. He glanced at his wrist-watch again. Nace ignored the signal.

"Where were you the evening



of the murder?" asked the detective.

"Here. I'd gone home for dinner, returned here about six forty-five. Police say he was killed about seven twenty or seven twenty-five. I was here at that time."

"Working kinda late, weren't you?" Nace thought of Packard and Brooke, who also claimed to have been working late that night.

Wolcott explained how he had been preparing transportation estimates for hauling logs out of the Klamath National Forest to Misty. The Misty mill intended to bid on the timber—hundreds of miles away and on the other side of the Cascade mountain range—because its own supply was being reduced by the government. Nace recalled newspaper articles reporting that Oregon sawmills were being forced to go far outside their usual logging areas to get timber because of the reduced supply. This was leading to the most savage competition for timber in the state's history. Only the strongest mills would survive. The rest would go broke.

"Did anyone see you enter or leave the office that evening?" asked Nace. "A security guard, perhaps?"

"I don't employ a security guard at present. I have an

alarm that's linked to the police station. Also, the Merchants Association night watchman checks on the yard every hour."

By the time Nace walked back to his Buick, he was convinced that Wolcott had murdered Fulkerson. The problem would be to prove it.

The tipoff had been Wolcott's insistence that he had a good reputation. Years of experience as a police officer and private detective had taught Nace only crooks refer to the hard work they've done to achieve a good reputation. Honest people answered any charge point by point. Honest people seldom mentioned their good reputations.

When Nace slid out of his Buick at the Forest Service headquarters the following morning, it was still raining. He felt hemmed in by the rain, by the forest that surrounded Misty, by this assignment. But most small towns had that effect on him, even without the rain.

Nace's appointment was with Greg Compton, the Santiam National Forest supervisor. Nace wanted his opinion of Everett Wolcott. Being supervisor of the forest from which Wolcott took most of his logs,

Compton should know him well.

Again Nace noticed the sleek, modern appearance of the federal building compared to the other buildings in Misty. The drab shabbiness that dominated the little town was absent here. Nace walked through the double doors to the receptionist, whose L-shaped desk stood between the building's engineering and administration sections. She told Nace that Compton's office was the second office on his right after he entered the administration section. He found it easily. The door was open. He knocked softly to attract the attention of a man inside who was working at his desk. The man looked up, smiled, motioned Nace to come in.

Six two, one hundred seventy pounds, with narrow shoulders and hips, Compton had a face whose deep lines indicated that most of his forty-four years had been spent outdoors. He peered at Nace through square bifocals. His office was larger than Packard's or Farr's, but not much larger. Except for the mandatory family photographs on the desk, it was strictly functional, all business. Nace told Compton his reason for being there.

"Andrew Farr claims that you saw him and his wife at a

local restaurant at approximately the same time Philip Fulkerson was being killed," said Nace. "Is that true?"

"Oh yes. I had a dinner date at the Waterside Restaurant and Lounge that evening. A business date, you understand."

"What time did you leave?"

"I can tell you almost exactly what time it was. One of the other men at the table remarked that it was seven thirty, that he had to get home before his wife sent their sons searching the bars for him." Compton laughed. "We left just a few minutes later."

"Together?"

"No, we all went our separate ways. I stopped in the men's room to wash my hands before I left. There was grease on them. Paper napkins never get grease out. Anyway, I arrived home about fifteen till eight."

"Do you live in Misty?"

Compton nodded. "I have a house on the west side of town with a wooded area in the rear. Not big, but comfortable enough for myself and my family. I have a wife and three kids. My son's at OSU; my daughters are still in school here."

The police had estimated that the murderer had shot Philip Fulkerson at about seven twenty-two. Could a man

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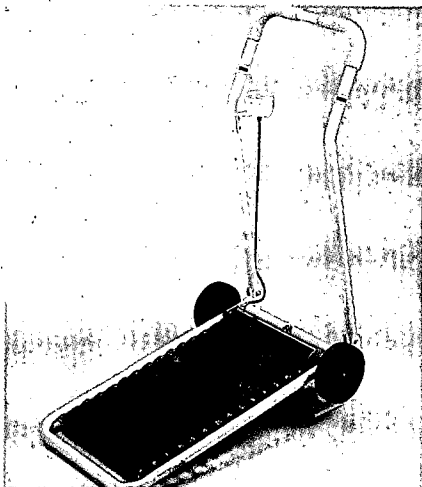
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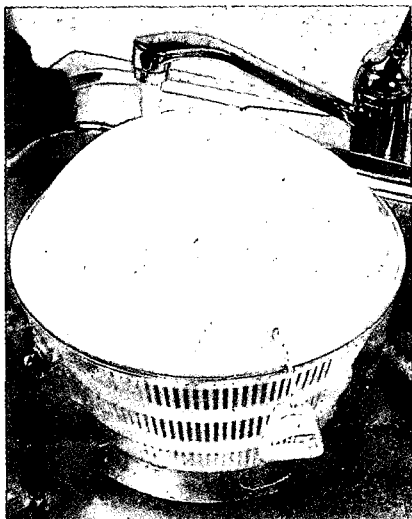


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have driven from the Maple Street boardinghouse to the Waterside Restaurant and Lounge in eight minutes? Easily. But could Farr have gone home, picked up his wife, and gone to the Waterside in that amount of time? Nace doubted it. And certainly the archaeologist wouldn't have taken his wife along for the ride when he went to commit murder.

"I would like to ask you some questions about Everett Wolcott," said Nace.

"Our second biggest customer," said Compton, nodding absentmindedly.

"As I understand the method, a sawmill buys federal timber, then contracts with a logging company to cut and haul it. Is that right?"

"Basically. Some sawmill companies own their own log trucks, but most prefer to contract with independent loggers. Wolcott is such a logger. The Misty sawmill uses his firm almost exclusively. Wolcott also buys some timber on his own account, however. That's unusual for a logging company, but not rare."

"So, whatever is done inside the national forest is done by Everett Wolcott's company," said Nace, "and not by the Misty sawmill company."

Compton nodded.

"Let's say for a moment that

Everett Wolcott wanted to do something illegal. Something at the logging site. Something that Philip Fulkerson might have noticed. What could it have been?"

Compton looked down at his desktop, nodding his head thoughtfully. "There could've been a lot of things," he said at last. "He might have been doing something in a substandard manner. Or he might have had too few men on the logging site. Or—"

"Why would that be illegal?" said Nace. "Union rules?"

Compton smiled. "It's got nothing to do with unions. The only fool who ever tried to unionize Ev Wolcott's firm was almost beaten to death. And I mean by Ev himself. Ev doesn't think highly of unions."

"Then why would having too few men at a logging site be illegal?"

"The contract that Ev signs with us states that he'll have a certain number of men. He's required to have them. Also a certain number of trucks, shovels, and so forth. Partly it's a safety issue. Mostly, from our point of view, it's a fire protection precaution. If a fire breaks out at a logging site, we want the loggers to have enough men and equipment on hand to put it out before it spreads out of control."

The phone rang.

While Compton talked on it, Nace leaned back in his chair and stared up at a big colored map of the Santiam National Forest. Compton was discussing the latest count of eagle nests and roosts in the Santiam. From the tone of the conversation, Nace gathered that there was some cause to be pleased, perhaps a new nest or two. Nace examined the map for anything familiar. Nothing was. This was a long way from Portland.

Compton hung up. "Sorry," he said. "Where were we?"

"Things illegal Everett Wolcott might have done that Philip Fulkerson would've noticed."

"Oh yes. Well, there's also timber piracy."

"What's that?"

"Stealing trees. Usually it's small operators, firewood cutters and such. Sometimes, though, a logging company buys federal timber, then illegally expands the boundaries of the sale."

"How?" asked Nace.

"Moving boundary tags and ribbons to include more timber than they actually bought. They can also chip off the boundary marks on trees, then paint these marks on other trees, expanding the boundaries in that manner. In sal-

vage logging areas—where they're just supposed to go in and cut diseased trees that have been marked by our employees—they simply paint marks on more trees."

"Isn't there any monitoring?"

Compton shook his head. "Virtually none until recently. We pretty much rely on the loggers to be honest. The vast majority are. We've had several big cases of timber theft during the last couple of years, though. There was a trial involving a company operating on the other side of the Cascades that got a lot of publicity. We tightened up the monitoring to appease our critics. Nobody's gonna steal more than a tree or two out of the Santiam that we don't know about it."

"Would there be much profit for a logging company to steal a few extra trees?" asked Nace.

"Figure you've got a sixteen-foot-tall tree. That'd be about a thousand board feet. The price of timber fluctuates wildly, but right now good pine in this forest is going for between three and four hundred per thousand board feet. So, ten stolen sixteen-foot-tall trees translates into four thousand dollars. That's just what they cheat us out of. Their own profit would be much higher."

Nace whistled appreciatively. "Anything else?"

"Faulty scaling. That's another form of timber theft. And . . . let me think . . . oh yes, the use of restricted roads."

"How's that work?"

"The Forest Service requires logging companies to build roads to reach and log their sale. After the job is completed, the roads are reserved for the use of the Forest Service and the company that built them. We want those roads to patrol for fire. But no company may use a logging road other than one it built or one so old that the exclusive right of one company to it has expired."

"If Wolcott ran trucks over someone else's road, would that be a serious rule violation?"

"You bet. We might even suspend their right to log federal timber. They have no business using roads other than their own."

"Anything else?" persisted Nace.

"Yes. Logging in an area that would threaten an endangered species. That phone conversation I just had was about bald eagles and golden eagles in the Santiam National Forest. Federal law protects both raptors. If Wolcott's logging operations had resulted in the death of such a bird, or threatened it, or threatened anything else that's endangered—animals or birds or rare vegetation—they would

be in big trouble if they failed to report it to us."

"I see. Anything else?"

Compton thought for a minute. Then he shook his head. Those were the only violations he could think of that a timber faller like Fulkerson might be privy to.

"Of course," resumed Compton, "it might be something that a timber faller might not normally know about. Failing to pay into Workmen's Compensation or something like that."

Nace remembered the full range of possibilities that Packard had listed.

"You do know about Ev's tax problems?" said Compton.

Nace's heart skipped a beat. "No," he said, "I didn't."

"It happened about four years ago. The IRS caught him cheating on his federal tax returns. I don't know how much he had to pay in back taxes, interest, and penalties, but it was plenty. Ev barely managed to stay out of the federal pen."

"So he's not above cheating the federal government."

Compton's eyes narrowed. "Well, I guess that's one way to put it."

Nace now knew Wolcott's character. The man had cheated on his taxes before, so he wouldn't hesitate to cheat the government in some other



manner. Perhaps by keeping inadequate crews or equipment at a logging site in violation of his contract, perhaps by stealing timber, perhaps by using other companies' roads. Nace's professional experience told him that a man Wolcott's age who stole in one way would steal in another. The question was how.

"What did you personally think of Philip Fulkerson?" Nace asked Compton.

"I didn't like him. You know what he did to Andy Farr. That was completely uncalled for. I was looking forward to seeing Mr. Fulkerson answer for that attack in court."

"How well did you know Fulkerson?"

"I never met the man. He was pointed out to me when he came in here a few days before his murder. That was the first time I ever saw what he looked like."

Nace asked with a calm that he didn't feel, "Fulkerson was in this building a few days before his death?"

Compton nodded.

"Why?" asked Nace.

"To see Stephen Packard about something."

**N**ace didn't bother to make an appointment. The moment he stepped out of Comp-

ton's office, he turned toward Packard's cubicle. He found Packard standing before one of his file cabinets, thumbing through a manila file.

"I want to talk with you," said Nace.

Packard turned around. "Uh, sure. Have a seat."

Nace sat down. Packard put away the file, then seated himself behind his desk. "What's the problem?" he asked.

"Why didn't you tell me that Philip Fulkerson came to visit you only days before his murder?"

Packard's expression froze. "Who told you that he did?"

"Are you denying it?"

Packard didn't answer for a moment, his brown eyes studying Nace. "No," he said at last. "I'm not saying that. He did come to bring me some information."

"On Wolcott?"

"No. On a Forest Service employee who is allegedly breaking the law. It has nothing to do with the Fulkerson matter. I was afraid that if I told you, in your efforts to learn more you might blow my own investigation into this other case. And it is an ongoing investigation. I can't tell you more than that."

What was Packard up to? Was he really concerned about his own investigation, assuming that such an investigation

even existed? Or was he using the cover of an investigation to protect something about himself?

"I don't buy it," said Nace.

"I don't really give a damn what you buy. That's the way it is."

"I doubt that you told the police chief about Fulkerson's visit either." When Packard's silence confirmed Nace's suspicion, he continued: "We'll see just how secret your alleged investigation remains after Mathias charges you with withholding evidence from the police in a murder case."

"Now, just a minute. I'm a cop, too. A Forest Service cop. Trained at the Federal Police Academy in Glynco. My own investigation—"

"Isn't as important as a murder case."

Nace stood up to leave.

"Wait a minute," said Packard, half-rising from his chair. "You don't know the situation."

"You're right. I don't. Because you haven't told me—or Chief Mathias." Nace turned.

"All right," growled Packard. "I'll tell you about it."

Nace returned to his chair, sat down while Packard settled back in his own chair. Packard's eyes and his frown signaled his resentment—possibly his hatred—of Nace.

"It was Andy Farr," said

Packard. For a second Nace wasn't sure he'd heard Packard right. When he became sure, he was more incredulous than ever.

"Let me get this right," said Nace. "Philip Fulkerson, who had beaten up Andrew Farr and who was being charged with assault and battery upon a federal employee, came to you with information aimed at harming Andrew Farr? I'm surprised that you listened."

"Are you? I doubt it. If you were still a cop and someone—anyone—came to you with information that a person was committing a crime, I don't think it would matter who supplied the information if it was accurate."

Nace nodded. Packard was right. If a criminal supplied damaging information on the cop who had arrested him, the fact that it was coming from a criminal and aimed at a cop mattered less than the fact that the cop was crooked. Crime was crime, regardless of the perpetrator or the informer.

"Was it accurate?" asked Nace.

"I believe it is."

"Tell me about it."

"Indian relics. It's no secret that federal archaeologists have some of the nicest private collections of Indian relics, which they invariably claim

came from state and private lands. In some cases, no doubt, they did. In other cases—”

Packard's phone rang. For four minutes Packard talked to someone about a conference they would attend in November. Finally he finished and resumed his explanation to Nace.

“Fulkerson's beating of Farr attracted a lot of attention in this area. Among the people whose attention it attracted were some other point hunters—that is, arrowhead collectors—who told Fulkerson that Farr himself was an Indian relic collector. They'd sold arrowheads to a man in Cottage Grove who had told them about Farr. It seems Farr had sold this guy a few relics when he needed cash a couple of years ago. Farr had shown him photographs of many other relics, hoping to interest him in them, and then the Cottage Grove man had selected the pieces he wanted. After these fellows told Fulkerson, Fulkerson told me.”

“And it checked out?”

“I drove up to Cottage Grove earlier this week to talk to the man. He wasn't thrilled at talking to anyone from the federal government, but I made it clear that this was a criminal investigation and that he could be in deep trouble unless he cooperated fully.”

A trace of smug satisfaction

in Packard's voice irritated Nace. He suspected Packard used his job as a bludgeon. He'd known cops like that. He'd also known politicians, journalists, teachers, army officers, and waiters like that.

“He confirmed everything,” continued Packard. “He also gave me the name of a collector in Gresham who allegedly bought an Indian mask from Andy. I'm driving up to see him tomorrow.”

“And if that also checks out?” asked Nace.

A smile crossed Packard's face. “I'll get a search warrant for Andy's house. If we find anything there that I have reason to suspect came off federal land, I'll arrest him. I'm not gonna look the other way just because he's a federal employee.”

“Did Farr know that Fulkerson snitched on him?”

“Not that I'm aware of.”

Nace wondered why Sandra hadn't mentioned Fulkerson's informing on Farr. She hadn't even hinted at it. Perhaps Fulkerson hadn't told her. Perhaps Fulkerson hadn't told her because there was nothing to tell. Was that it? Was Packard lying? If so, why? It could only be to hide the real reason for Fulkerson's visit. What did he and Fulkerson have going between them? An investigation

into Andrew Farr's illegal relics collection? Or something else?

Everett Wolcott's lead on the suspect list had been cut down a bit. Packard was close to him now. Even Farr went up a notch, despite his apparently ironclad alibi. But Wolcott was still his best bet.

Instead of leaving the building after the talk with Packard, Nace dropped by Compton's office again.

"Would it be possible," Nace asked him, "to get copies of your timber sale results for, say, the last two years?"

"Sure." Compton jumped up, headed for the door. "Sit down and I'll be back with them in a few minutes."

Compton returned in twenty minutes with several sheets of track paper. He handed them to Nace.

Detailed on the papers were all sales of timber within the Santiam National Forest during the previous two years. The last sale had been last summer, the Otter Creek sale to Wolcott Logging. The lists broke down the amount of board feet sold and the sale price by species of timber, such as Ponderosa pine, lodgepole pine, Douglas fir, hemlock, spruce, and alder. A plan was forming in Nace's mind. But for it to work, he would need more than the sales

records for the Santiam National Forest. He would need the records of every national forest that Wolcott Logging bought timber in.

Nace looked up at Compton, who had leaned back in his chair to study the detective while Nace studied the papers. "Wolcott bids for timber in forests other than the Santiam, doesn't he?"

"You bet. Klamath, Willamette, that I know of. Perhaps Deschutes as well."

"What about state forest timber?"

Compton nodded. "He bids on that, too."

"BLM timber also?"

Compton nodded again.

"Does he buy private timber?"

"No. There's no private timber left in Oregon except a few stands owned by some of the really big timber companies."

Nace restrained himself from smiling. It was perfect! The sales records of all federal and state forests would be public information. Private timber sales might not have been, although he was ignorant of the laws governing the reporting of such sales. What he needed now was a central retrieval point.

"I need more timber sales records," said Nace. "The records of every national forest, BLM district, and State For-

estry Department sale for the last year or two."

Compton chuckled. "That's a mighty tall order. We could get it for you using our computers, but it would take so long that we would be interfering with our own operations. I'm sorry."

"Actually it's only the sales to one company that I'm interested in," said Nace. "Wolcott Logging."

"It would still take hours," Compton said.

"There's a young woman sitting in a jail cell on a murder rap who I'm convinced is innocent. That means there's also a man or woman walking around free who is guilty of murder. A lot is riding on this, Greg."

"And getting this information on Wolcott's timber purchases is the key to your investigation?"

"It could be."

Compton thought a minute, then asked, "What type of information would you need?"

"The works. I want total board feet sold, divided down by species and the price per thousand board feet for each species, plus the inventory of each species on hand after Wolcott completed logging."

"In other words, how much of the timber he bought that he didn't log?"

"Right. And I need it for every national and state forest in

Oregon and every BLM district in Oregon."

After Compton thought over the request for another three or four minutes, he finally nodded, said, "Okay, but it's going to take a while."

It did.

Nace remained at the Forest Service building in the main computer room while one of the two operators employed there retrieved the information from the Forest Service, BLM, and State Forestry computers around the state. By the time Nace left the building to return to the Misty Inn, it was late afternoon, still raining hard, but he carried a thick stack of track papers covered with figures representing money, board feet, and species.

Nace stopped by the hotel front desk, where he told the manager that he would be leaving early the next morning. He paid his bill in advance.

When Nace reached his room, he turned his attention to the computer printouts. Most were brief messages from other computers stating that a search of their data banks had indicated that Wolcott Logging had never bought their timber. Only a few records other than those for the Santiam showed bidding activity by Wolcott. But Nace believed that it wasn't the quantity that

counted in this case, it was the quality.

He worked on the figures for several hours, right through dinnertime. What he wanted to discover, as nearly as it was possible, was Wolcott's gross profit on each sale.

About eight o'clock, someone knocked on his door.

Preoccupied with the print-outs, Nace walked to the door without really wondering who could be knocking. He left his pistol where he'd put it upon his arrival in the room, on the end table beside his bed.

When Nace opened the door he found himself facing two men. Both were tall and muscular. Both wore black ski masks. This wasn't the skiing season.

Nace tried to slam the door. Too late. One man blocked it, dived through, and tackled him. The other man was right behind him.

Nace kept on his feet. He slugged the man who'd rammed into him. The man fell.

Both attackers were larger than Nace. Both wore blue-jeans, logger's boots, leather work gloves. The man Nace had knocked down wore a brown ski coat; the other wore a long green jacket over a red chamois shirt. Both had the

posture and ease of movement of men under fifty.

Green Jacket closed on Nace, who was backing away from the door toward the end table. Green Jacket moved in faster. Brown Coat rose, fists clenched, and stepped up beside his companion.

Slowly, cautiously, they began to move toward Nace.

Nace knew this was no good. They would reach him before he could reach the gun. Bold action was required.

"Hiiyyaaaa!" he screamed, charging Brown Coat, kicking toward his stomach.

He connected. His right shoe dug into the man's belly. Nace slammed his elbows into Green Jacket's face. The man slugged Nace in the stomach, doubling him over, but Green Jacket was falling back from the elbow attack even while he threw the punch.

Nace turned, dashed to the end table. He gripped the gun.

Arms grabbed him around the chest, pulling him sideways and down in one swift motion. Nace and his attacker crashed to the floor. Nace managed to hold onto the gun. He pulled the trigger.

The explosion stopped activity for two seconds, then the fight resumed. Suddenly Nace broke his right hand free. He swung hard with the gun. It

slammed the left side of his assailant's masked forehead. The man tried to pin him down again, failed, and Nace hit him on the head with his gun a second time. Then, with Brown Coat hurrying to help his buddy, a third time. Blood spurted from the man's forehead. Nace pointed the gun at Brown Coat as he leaned down to grab him. "Get back!" he ordered.

Brown Coat ignored him, reached for his hand—

Nace fired.

Brown Coat fell back against the bed, his hands rising to clutch the side of his neck. Blood spurted so violently from it that Nace suspected he'd blown a hole through the man's artery. Brown Coat gasped over and over, "Ahhh! Ahhh! Ahhh!"

"All right," Nace said, aiming the gun at Green Jacket, "hold it." Green Jacket's eyes moved from Nace's face to the gun. Then he appeared to collapse in upon himself. Both his hands rose up to grip his bleeding forehead.

Less than two minutes had passed since Nace had opened the door.

"What's going on in there?" a voice demanded. "Did I hear gunshots?"

Nace recognized the manager's voice. "Call the police," he said.

It took ten minutes for Chief Zach Mathias and a lieutenant to arrive.

"Looks like you gave a good account of yourself," Mathias told Nace, looking from him to the two assailants on the floor. "You don't look that tough."

"I'm not. If I hadn't reached my gun, I would now be dead, captive, or beaten half to death."

Mathias walked over to Brown Coat. He reached down, pulled off the man's ski mask. The man groaned painfully, the pulling of the mask also pulling his skin taut, which aggravated his wound. He was a long-jawed, wide-mouthed fellow with a complexion so dark that he looked almost Latin.

"Hello, Jeb," said Mathias.

"Uh, chief."

Mathias walked over to Green Jacket. He started to reach down for that man's mask too, but the man beat him to it by pulling off his own mask. He cried out. The mask tore at the forehead wound. The face was a round, lineless sort that reminded Nace of the skipper on *Gilligan's Island*, except this fellow was in his mid-twenties.

"And Owen," said Mathias. "How are you this evening?"

Owen of the green jacket answered not.

Mathias turned to his lieu-



tenant. "Read 'em their rights," he said.

"You seem to know these two," Nace said to the police chief. "Who are they?"

"Local loggers. They work for Everett Wolcott."

"That figures."

"They both have extensive arrest records, too. I doubt I'll be able to get them to say much. They know Ev will bail them out as soon as the amount is set. They probably know that we can't tie this to Wolcott, even if he does bail them out. I'm sure he sent them, though. I don't know why he would. I'll question him, see if I can rattle him." Nace almost asked Mathias to stay out of it. But he didn't. Questioning Wolcott would make Mathias feel useful, would also make him feel as if he and Nace were a team. Wolcott would lie. But it wouldn't harm the investigation to question him. And when Nace closed in on Wolcott, he would need Mathias's help.

"I'll spend the weekend in Portland," said Nace. "I think I can get information there that will show exactly what Fulkerson was holding over Wolcott."

"How are you going to do that?"

"I can't say."

Nace could have said. But you don't tell a police chief that you plan to break a federal law.

Especially when it is a criminal—not a civil—law that you plan to break.

Nace looked at his wristwatch: seven o'clock. Marty Wiebe should arrive at any minute. Wiebe had already taken longer than Nace had thought he would. He'd hoped to have the case closed by Monday noon, and here it was Monday evening and he was still in Portland.

He walked to one of the living room windows, stared down at the street below. Nace had two huge living room windows, one facing west and one south, with only a couple of feet of wall between them. His was the southwest corner apartment on the fourth floor of the Tyler and Hodges Building. Spacious, modern, sleek, the envy of everyone who'd ever seen it, the apartment commanded an excellent view of his part of town, with its tall buildings and many lights. Lights were about all Nace could see now. Rain obscured everything else. Headlights from the traffic on Stark, window lights, and orange street lights were reflected on the wet asphalt streets. The city looked dark. The lights weren't being reflected off the cloud cover the way they usually were in Portland.

Nace went into the kitchen, drew himself a glass of water, and added the tiniest bit of scotch.

The doorbell rang at a few minutes past eight.

Marty Wiebe was a short, skinny, bespectacled guy in his early thirties. Habitually dressed in colored T-shirts and bluejeans, he looked like an aging high school kid whose passion was science fiction. He hurried into the apartment without a word when Nace opened the door, seated himself on the long gold sofa, and began spreading computer track paper across the coffee table.

"It took me longer than I'd thought," said Wiebe. "But you did say every bank in Oregon. It took me four hours to enter the computers of that new Japanese bank. They've incredible security. Four hours!"

Nace smiled. Anyone else, including any other computer hacker, would have considered breaking into the files of the most secure bank in Oregon an achievement if it took four days. Not Wiebe. But then Wiebe was the best.

Wiebe finished spreading the track papers. "These are the printouts of the target accounts," he said. "Of the names you gave me, only two had a single bank account."

"Compton is one, I'll bet."

Wiebe nodded. "The other was Fulkerson. Both had their accounts in the First National Bank of Misty. Everyone else on the list has at least two accounts. Everett Wolcott has accounts up the yingyang."

Nace glanced over the papers. He noticed that Wiebe had sorted them according to the bank names. That wouldn't do for his own purpose. Nace resorted them according to the account names:

PHILIP FULKERSON FIRST NATIONAL BANK OF MISTY

GREGORY COMPTON FIRST NATIONAL BANK OF MISTY

ANDREW FARR FIRST NATIONAL BANK OF MISTY

ANDREW FARR WEST SHORE BANK OF PORTLAND

STEPHEN PACKARD FIRST NATIONAL BANK OF MISTY

STEPHEN PACKARD COMMUNITY BANK OF SALEM

EVERETT WOLCOTT FIRST NATIONAL BANK OF MISTY

EVERETT WOLCOTT WEST SHORE BANK OF EUGENE

EVERETT WOLCOTT WEST SHORE BANK OF PORTLAND

WOLCOTT LOGGING FIRST NATIONAL BANK OF MISTY

WOLCOTT LOGGING FRONTIER PACIFIC BANK OF PORTLAND

WOLCOTT LOGGING PONDEROSA SAVINGS BANK OF BEND

WOLCOTT LOGGING HUNTERFIELD BANK OF COOS BAY

"It looks like I've got my work cut out for me," said Nace after he'd finished. "I didn't realize there would be so many."

Wiebe said nothing.

Nace suspected that Wiebe wondered why he wanted the information. But he would never ask. And Nace would never tell. Even though Wiebe might be able to suggest a shortcut using a computer.

"How much do I owe you, Marty?"

"Three days; three grand."

That had been as Nace anticipated. Originally he'd believed it would take Wiebe two days. He'd drawn two thousand dollars out of his bank. When Monday noon passed with no word from Wiebe, Nace had gone down and withdrawn another thousand. This sort of work had to be paid for with cash.

Nace went into his dining room. He removed the envelope containing the money from beneath that morning's edition of *The Oregonian*. He returned to the living room and handed the money to Wiebe.

After the hacker left, Nace returned to his kitchen for a refill. This time more scotch, less water.

Fulkerson's and Compton's accounts showed no unusual activity. Pretty much salary

deposits only, with an occasional large sum that could be explained by the sale of an old car or something.

The same wasn't true of Andrew Farr's accounts. The Misty First National account resembled Compton's, except that the income and expenditures were smaller, reflecting the difference in pay between a forest supervisor and an archaeologist. The oddity was in the account he'd opened in 1985 at the West Shore Bank's Portland branch. Neither the deposits nor the expenditures at West Shore appeared to be based on any pattern or routine. In 1985, he'd made three deposits totaling three thousand four hundred thirty-three dollars and thirty-three cents; in 1986, one deposit of five hundred dollars; in 1987, three deposits totaling five thousand four hundred fifty dollars and one withdrawal of five thousand; in 1988, two deposits totaling eleven hundred seventy-five dollars, one withdrawal of one thousand; in 1989, three deposits totaling nineteen thousand five hundred, one withdrawal of a thousand dollars; in 1990, one deposit of a thousand, one withdrawal of three thousand.

Nace wished he knew more about Farr's background. Perhaps the bank activity repre-

sented income from a trust fund, stocks, bonds, or real estate. More likely, the money came from selling Indian artifacts looted from the national forest.

Stephen Packard's banking activity presented a similar puzzle. Packard had established his Misty First National account in 1980, probably when he went to work for the Santiam National Forest. It showed the normal income and expenditures the account for such a person could be expected to show. But Packard's Community Bank account was different. Opened in March, 1989, with a ten thousand dollar deposit, there had since been three more deposits, each of five thousand. Where had Packard gotten twenty-five thousand dollars?

Even more complex were the Wolcott accounts. After some figuring back and forth, Nace decided to ignore Everett Wolcott's personal account. He also eliminated the Hunterfield Bank account, which had had less than nine hundred dollars in it since November, 1987, and appeared to be dormant. That left him with the three remaining Wolcott Logging accounts.

He added these figures horizontally so that he ended up with one income figure and one

expense figure for each month since January, 1985. Next, he took the Forest Service records on Wolcott timber sales to check them against the bank figures. This would give him an incomplete picture at best, but he trusted that Everett Wolcott's crookedness was recent enough that it would show itself by a rise in gross income without a corresponding rise in gross expenditures. The Forest Service figures would show the proportion of sales from year to year.

It didn't take nearly as long as he'd feared it would for him to notice a discrepancy. In late 1987, income rose without a rise in expenditures. That made no sense. If timber income had been rising for everyone, timber would have been more valuable, sparking higher bids. That meant either that Wolcott had cut an expenditure no one else had cut, or that he was selling more logs than he was buying as trees. Nace's figures indicated that latter.

Timber piracy.

And that was the motive.

But whose motive?

Compton had said that recent cases of timber piracy had led to closer monitoring by the Forest Service. Yet Nace's figures indicated that Wolcott had gotten perhaps two hundred fifty thousand dollars' worth of

stolen trees. And obviously Wolcott had believed he would get away with it.

Nace lifted his phone receiver. He started to make a reservation at the Misty Inn, glanced at his wristwatch—it was eleven forty-eight—and decided not to disturb the manager. It wouldn't take a reservation to get a room at the old hotel anyway. Instead he called Directory Assistance.

"What city, please?" asked the woman.

"Misty."

"And the name?"

"Mathias. Zachary Mathias."

**B**efore noon Tuesday Nace went to the San-tiam National Forest headquarters. There, Compton showed him on his map where the Otter Creek sale—Wolcott's last sale—was located. Nace wouldn't tell him what he was looking for. Compton appeared suspicious. Nace suspected that the supervisor would send Packard up after him. That was fine. But he hadn't anticipated being delayed by his inexperience in navigating muddy forest roads.

For a time Nace feared that he was lost. His own calculations indicated he should have reached the Otter Creek logging site a mile back. Instead, he was surrounded by huge

Ponderosa pines. Dense forest bordered both sides of the road. Ahead lay the mud road in a tunnel of pines, darkened by the eternal shadow of enormous trees whose limbs almost touched each other above the road. The rain fell heavily and steadily.

Suddenly it was in front of him.

A great hole had been punched in the forest. Surrounded by pine, this mud flat of more than a thousand acres on both sides of the road contained only slash piles. Acres and acres of mud and slash. That, and one other thing at this end of the clearcut: a green Forest Service pickup truck parked just off the road.

Nace stopped in the road to study the area. The clearcut was mostly level, although it did rise as a knoll on the farthest side. Although forest surrounded it, not one tree taller than two feet stood within the clearcut. There were a few snags, but only a few. Giant heaps of limbs, pine cones, bark, and other debris were everywhere, fifty to a hundred feet from each other, some piled more than ten feet high. Other than these slash piles, there were only the snags, the baby trees, the thousands of tire and tread tracks, and hundreds of stumps.

Nace eased off his brake, continued up the road. He looked for anyone. No one was near the pickup. No one was in sight. He stopped when parallel with the pickup and killed his motor.

For a minute he remained in the car.

The rain drummed loudly upon its roof and hood. Nace reached over to the jockey box, sprang it open. His Smith & Wesson was there, lying amid road maps and a black-handled flashlight. He stuffed the gun into the deep side pocket of his raincoat.

Nace got out. Up here the rain was cold. He closed the car door, buttoned his coat. Then he cupped his hands around his mouth and yelled, "Packard!"

He waited.

No response.

How far did his voice carry? Not far. Besides its interference with sound waves, the rain created its own noise as it pounded the mud, the slash piles, and everything else. He shouted again, with the same result.

Nace walked over to the pickup, opened the driver's side door to look inside. Everything looked normal: a few maps and papers on the seat beside a clipboard, a battery on the floor connected to the two-way radio. He honked the horn three, four,

five times. Then he stepped back, slammed the door.

Nace waited, listening.

Still nothing.

Logically any trespassing by Wolcott onto unsold federal timber would be on the perimeters of the sale. That meant that anyone investigating timber theft would go look at the outer boundaries of the clear-cut. That was where the evidence would be.

If someone wanted to kill Nace, it would be the best place to wait. There, far from the road, his body wouldn't be found quickly.

Nace walked to the biggest slash pile in the immediate vicinity. About eighty feet from the pickup, it was eight or nine feet tall at its highest point, about seventy feet long. It looked solid: needle-laden branches and limbs rising like a huge beaver dam where no river flowed. No bullet could penetrate it. Of course, there were other slash piles behind it, and if a man were to come up behind him . . . but he couldn't cover every possibility, only the most likely one.

He settled down at the end of the slash pile where he could watch the pickup through a tiny hole in the debris. He made himself as comfortable as possible, and waited.

Five minutes passed.

Ten. Then twenty.

A crow landed between his car and the government pickup. It picked at the ground for a minute, cawed a couple of times, then flew away.

An hour passed.

Nace hadn't been so wet since the monsoon season in Vietnam.

An hour and forty-five minutes.

Two hours.

Two and a quarter hours.

And then Packard appeared. He came from the forest edge, carrying something in his right hand. Possibly a rifle.

Nace squinted, trying to see it through the downpour. He kept his grip tight on the handle of his Smith & Wesson.

Packard stopped when he reached his pickup. He stared for a moment at Nace's white Buick. He scanned the clearcut, his eyes aimed directly at Nace for a moment without seeing him. Packard sloshed over to the Buick. He held his hand above his eyes like a soldier saluting, put his hand and face against the window to look inside the car. He straightened up, scanned the clearcut again.

Packard went to his pickup, honked three times. "Victor!" he yelled.

Now was the time.

Nace stepped around the slash pile, hurried forward

while Packard was looking in the opposite direction. Nace was forty feet from him when Packard turned and saw him. At that moment Nace could see that what Packard held in his hand was a rifle.

"It looks like I was right," called Nace, now thirty feet from Packard. "Wolcott trespassed on federal timber."

Packard worked the rifle bolt. "Sorry about this, Victor," he said.

Nace drew the Smith & Wesson, aimed. "Don't be," he said.

Packard froze.

For three seconds both men stood motionless. Then Packard swung up the rifle, fired. Nace fired at the same instant.

Packard's bullet went wild.

Nace's hit Packard's left ribcage. Packard screamed, dropping the rifle and falling to his knees. Nace kept his pistol on him.

A minute later Nace heard a car behind him. A 1991 white LeMans equipped with overhead red and blue lights appeared from the opposite direction Nace had come from in his Buick. The police car had, of course, come up the same road Nace had used. It had simply gone farther up, where Mathias could hide it in the forest while he himself watched what happened in the clearcut using binoculars. Just as Nace had asked



him to do last night on the phone.

Out of the corner of his eye Nace saw Mathias get out of the LeMans, hurry toward them. Mathias put away his own pistol when he saw Packard's condition. He then stepped over to the agent, reached down, picked up the rifle.

"Stand up," Mathias ordered Packard.

"C-can't."

"Look, mister, as far as I'm concerned there ain't a whole lot of difference between you and a crooked cop. I hate crooked cops. So you got a choice. Stand up, or I'll pull you to your feet myself."

Packard stumbled to his feet.

Mathias's quick search revealed that he carried no other weapons. The police chief read him his rights, then took him to the police car and loaded him in.

“Are you going back to Portland now?”

Nace leaned back against his car, smiled at Sandra Young. They were on the sidewalk near the police station. The rain was steady, still.

"Yes," he said. "I have another case to handle for another lawyer."

"Sounds exciting. I've got a

question, if you don't mind answering it."

"Go ahead," said Nace.

"I understand what happened clear enough. Everett Wolcott was stealing federal timber. Packard found out and forced him to pay blackmail. Phil also found out about Wolcott's thefts and reported it to Packard, thinking that Packard would send Wolcott to prison. Instead, Packard murdered Phil to keep the payments coming and to cover up his own involvement."

"Right."

"What I don't understand is how you figured that the murderer was Packard instead of Wolcott."

Nace had to be careful. He dared not mention Packard's bank deposits, even to Sandra. The FBI frowned on hacking into bank computers.

"Compton mentioned the careful monitoring the Forest Service was doing to prevent these timber thefts," said Nace. "When I saw the size of Wolcott's thefts, I realized that something was fishy. How did Wolcott get away with stealing so many trees in one forest? Why didn't Packard—who supposedly watched for such things—spot him? Why did Wolcott think he could keep on stealing trees and not get caught?"

"In other words, he had to have had Stephen Packard on his payroll."

"That or blackmail. It turned out to be blackmail, but it worked the same way. Packard discovered one theft and allowed Wolcott to continue stealing, provided he received regular payments of five thousand dollars."

"Poor Phil. He trusted that man." Yeah, thought Nace, poor brutal Philip Fulkerson.

She said goodbye and so did he.

Five minutes later Misty was behind him, Portland ahead. It was as if he'd come out of a place with too little air. He breathed that much more freely. Even the steady, heavy rain seemed nicer.

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## **SOLUTION TO THE JULY "UNSOLVED":**

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The two diplomats were of significantly different height. One was about the height of the sergeant, who is a head taller than Vince. The other was about Vince's height.

When Vince sat in the driver's seat of the car, waiting for clearance to tow it away, he adjusted the rear view mirror *down* so he could see out the back. Therefore it must have been adjusted for a taller person before: the taller of the two diplomats.

# UNSOLVED

by Ken Weber

*Unsolved at present, that is, but can you work it out?*

*The answer will appear in the September issue.*

Gary Ellesmere had two excuses for being on the road on a hot August morning. The first was simply to get "field time." A reasonable enough explanation—on the surface, at least. After all, one of the first policy changes Gary had made when he became chief was to decree that everyone—and he meant *everyone*—who carried a badge would spend a certain amount of time in the field. So in effect he was simply following his own orders. "Leadership by example": it was a phrase he used often with the staff sergeants.

Gary's other excuse was to road test—just one more time—the patrol car borrowed from the Tottenham City force. Another reasonable enough excuse, for his second move as the new chief was to convince the county treasury department that the force needed six new custom-built sedans to replace the highway patrol fleet. It was a coup on Gary's part. Tottenham City already had these new machines, and he knew his people drooled every time one of the powerful vehicles was anywhere near.

Two sound and sensible excuses, then. And Gary Ellesmere knew his staff didn't believe either one of them. The plain truth was the chief had a smashing hangover.

His fiftieth birthday the night before had been an occasion of such fanfare and hoopla that Gary allowed himself, in his words, "to be overserved." That was the real reason he was on the road this morning. He had forsaken an air-conditioned office for a very warm car, but the relative isolation had made it a fair trade. No telephones, no irate citizens, none of what he liked to call the "dilemmas of leadership." And even for a fifty-year-old this machine wasn't such a bad item to be spinning around in.

The sun made Gary squint as he turned off the highway onto a side road. Just about five minutes down the road was the purest and coldest drinking water in the whole county. It came from a spring that fed from underneath a long-abandoned one room schoolhouse and ran out a rusty pipe with enough force to make a permanent drinking fountain. Not even the exceptionally hot dry weather they were having this summer could slow it down. Local farmers called it the Tap. The little stream to which it gave birth

they called the Creek. Either source would serve Gary right now. His dry throat was pushing upward to join a pounding headache.

It was when he pulled out of a careless wander across the yellow line that Gary saw the figure out on the road. In fact, his eyes took in the scene for a full second before his brain told him to brace up. Something was wrong.

The figure was a boy—no, a man. Short, though. He was running hard toward the patrol car.

In the few seconds it took to close the gap, Gary could see it was indeed a man. His policeman's mind went automatically through a checklist: adult male, white, maybe mid-thirties, about five six, one hundred sixty-five pounds or so, big muscles, mustache, brown and brown, balding on the peaks, denim shorts—cutoffs. Someone had lopped the legs off a pair of jeans. Green basketball jersey with 60 on it. No team name. Sneakers really worn and dirty.

The man was puffing very hard.

"Back—ba—oh, God! Back there!" He pointed vaguely behind him and leaned heavily on the driver's side door. "My wife. Back there. In the kitchen. She's dead! I know it! She's dead!"

Gary shrank back a little in spite of himself. The pungent smell of the man's sweat overlay the morning heat. He didn't like the guy leaning on the door, either. It hemmed him in.

"Back off. Lemme out." Gary spoke with calmness but authority. He didn't even notice that his headache was gone.

The man moved to lean over the fender. Runs of sweat rolled down his arms and whorled over the thin film of road dust. His breathing began to slow as Gary got out.

"No. No. Get back in! We gotta go . . ." The man waved at a spot farther down the road. He was obviously weak from the run and what appeared to Gary to be the onset of hysteria.

"My wife! She's dead! Blood all over. She's not breathing, she's—God!—*chopped up!*"

Gary could see the man was about to lose control. "Okay, get in." The man ran around the front of the car and got into the passenger seat. From the edge of his concentration Gary couldn't quite push away the impression that his passenger was going to stink up Tottenham City's new patrol car, and it was due to be returned that afternoon.

Maybe it was being ordered into the car, or the sense that someone was now taking charge, but something seemed to calm the man a bit.

"Down there." He pointed with more specific emphasis this time

as Gary pulled back on to the road. "Just past the creek. Red brick house. How did—I mean, how come—I mean, a *cop*! I didn't expect a cop! I was running for help. My wife's dead. I'm sure of it. See, I was checking fence. Right there. That field. See?"

Gary could see a large pasture that had obviously not been grazed for some time.

"I couldn'ta been gone more than half an hour. Checking fence, I mean. Only one wire down and the field's not that big to go all the way round. I went back to th' house for a drink of water and there she was on the floor by the sink—turn there, the gate's open—and the phone's out! I ran out to the road. Nobody! I was running up to the Purdleys' for their phone. That's when I saw you." The front right tire settled in a pothole as Gary stopped by the house. The man bolted out immediately and ran to a screen door that didn't seem to be quite closed.

"Hold it!" Gary shouted. "We go in together!" In one motion he stepped out the driver's side door and pulled his communicator out of its cradle.

The response at the other end was immediate. "Go ahead, chief."

For a moment Gary paused to wonder just how the dispatcher knew who it was, but then he realized that the fancy new patrol car had a transmit code. "I've got a possible homicide here." He could almost hear the attention double. "I'm three clicks east of Number 10 on County 22. Red brick farmhouse. Name Haspen, H-A-S-P-E-N, on the mailbox. I want an ambulance and a backup right away. For the present I'm calling this a domestic, but if you don't hear from me again in three minutes—mark, that's *three*—treat this as an 'officer down.' I'm going in now. Acknowledge."

The "ten-four" was instant. Gary dropped the communicator and flipped the switch on the light bar so that arriving vehicles could key in on the location more easily. As he ran up to the screen door, he could see that on the wall just above some trampled flowers, the telephone line had been neatly severed.

"Okay. Stay just ahead of me," he said, and motioned to the man to go through the doorway.

*Gary is being prudently cautious, but it's apparent he doesn't expect a trap. Why is he "calling this a domestic"? What makes him suspicious of the man he's supposedly helping?*

See page 100 for the solution to the July puzzle.

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# The Gingerbread Girl

by Dan Crawford



Once upon a time, though the neighbors say it was twice, the old woman who lives on the edge of the forest baked some gingerbread for her club meeting. She made a gingerbread house and a gingerbread garden, and set them in the center of her table. Then she set up a gingerbread girl to work in the garden.

The house and garden looked

very nice. But the gingerbread girl said, "Forget this! I'm not going to work in a garden while I can run!"

The old woman told her, "You don't really have to work. You just have to stand there until the ladies in the club are ready for dessert."

"And then what?" asked the gingerbread girl.

The old woman told her.

"Whoops!" said the ginger-

bread girl. "Say goodbye because here I go!"

The old woman ran after the gingerbread girl but couldn't catch her before she got to the door. A squirrel in the bird feeder in the yard jumped down and said, "You smell good!"

"I outran the woman and I can outrun a squirrel!" shouted the cookie. "No one can catch the gingerbread girl!" And she ran into the woods.

"What are you?" demanded a hungry badger in the woods. "Are you good to eat?"

"Ho!" shouted the gingerbread girl. "I outran an old woman and a hungry squirrel, and I'll outrun you. I'm a gingerbread girl!"

The badger ran after her, but tripped on an old pop can that some careless campers had thrown away. The gingerbread girl ran through the woods until she saw a bear.

"I do like runaway cookies," said the bear. "Yum yum!"

"I don't care, you old bear; try to run if you dare!" sang the gingerbread girl. "I outran the badger, the woman, the squirrel, and I'll outrun you. I'm the gingerbread girl!"

The bear ran after her, but he was fat and slow. The gingerbread girl ran on.

An old dog was sitting on a stump. "I haven't had any gingerbread in years!" he barked.

"Come here so I can eat you!"

"For a dog, you're a hog, you old bump on a log!" shouted the gingerbread girl. "I outran a bear, badger, woman, and squirrel, and I'll outrun you. I'm a gingerbread girl!"

"Well, let's just try that," said the dog. He jumped off the stump and ran after her. He was a wise old dog who had chased a lot of rabbits in his day. He ran closer and closer up behind the gingerbread girl.

Oh dear, she said to herself. I wish the old woman had thought to bake a gingerbread motorcycle. She could see the dog was going to catch her soon, so she ran up a tree.

The dog barked and howled, but he knew he couldn't climb a tree. So he sat down and looked at the gingerbread girl up in the branches. "I can wait as long as you can," he said.

"Oh, go away!" said the gingerbread girl, making a face at him. "You run too fast."

The dog just laughed and watched her. "Well, this is a fine pan of cake," muttered the gingerbread girl. "I have to think of something else." She looked around at the branches of the tree.

"I'm such a great runner," she said. "Maybe I'm a good jumper, too."

She looked to see if the dog was still sitting down. Then she



ran as fast as she could along the biggest branch. At the end of it, she jumped.

"Ouch!" she said, as she landed on a pile of feathers.

"Oh dear!" cried the pile of feathers.

The gingerbread girl had landed on a fluffy chicken. "Hi!" she said. "You don't know me, but I outran a bear and a . . ."

"Awk!" cried the fluffy chicken. "The sky is falling!" She jumped up and ran away.

"You stupid chicken!" shouted the gingerbread girl. "That was me!"

She jumped up and ran after the chicken, yelling, "I outran a bear and a badger and almost a dog!"

But the chicken had met a friend. "Lucy Goosey! Lucy Goosey!" she shouted. "The sky is falling!"

"It is NOT!" yelled the gingerbread girl. "I outran a bear and a badger . . ."

The goose and the chicken were squawking so loudly they couldn't hear her. The gingerbread girl ran behind them until they met a duck.

"Bucky Ducky!" they shouted. "Bucky Ducky! The sky is falling!"

"It isn't either!" screamed the gingerbread girl. "I outran . . ."

But the chicken and Lucy Goosey and Bucky Ducky were

running on again. So the gingerbread girl ran after them, shouting, until they met a turkey.

"Perky Turkey!" they shouted. "Perky Turkey! The sky is falling!"

"You stupid birds!" shouted the gingerbread girl. "I could explain everything if you'd just *listen* to me!"

But they wouldn't listen and now five of them were running through the woods. Soon they met a cat.

"Mitty Kitty!" screamed the birds. "Mitty Kitty! The sky is falling!"

"Listen!" shrieked the gingerbread girl. "I know what happened; I was there!"

But now Mitty Kitty started to run and they were all making more noise than ever.

At the other end of the forest lived an old fox. She was sitting out in front of her cave, looking very unhappy. Her teeth hurt because she never brushed them, and they were no longer sharp enough to bite through the mouse sandwich she had made for her supper.

"Oh dear me!" she sighed. "What is to become of me? Nothing to eat but hard bread and a mouse!"

Suddenly, out of the woods, there came a big crowd of animals, all jabbering and crying.

"Roxy Foxy!" they shouted.

"Roxy Foxy! The sky is falling!"

"The sky is falling?" she asked them.

From the back of the crowd she heard a voice yell, "No!"

"What's that?" asked Roxy.

Everyone turned around to look, and the gingerbread girl pushed her way through the crowd.

"I saw it all," she said. "I'll tell you. These stupid birds and stuff got it all wrong. I outran a badger, a bear, a squirrel, and a silly old woman. I'm the gingerbread girl. A dog almost caught me, but I ran up a tree, and ran out on a branch and tried to jump free. I landed on top of this fat, stupid hen who thought the sky fell, told this dumb goose, and then they ran through the forest all yelling and squawking and never slowed down even though I was talking."

"But the sky is falling!" shouted the chicken.

"It is not!" the gingerbread girl yelled back.

The old fox sighed and shook her head. "I'm getting too old for this fairy tale work," she said. "Everything's so confusing these days. These animals! And now this gingerbread girl! I don't understand it at all."

"But I just told you, stupid!" exclaimed the gingerbread girl. "Listen this time. I outran a badger, a bear, and a squir-

rel, and a silly old woman. I'm the gingerbread girl. A dog almost caught me, but I ran up a tree, and ran out on a branch, and tried to jump free. I landed on top of that fat, stupid hen who thought the sky fell, told this dumb goose, and then they ran through the forest all yelling and squawking and never slowed down even though I was talking. They all ran out here, the whole stupid zoo, as if I had nothing better to do!"

"Who's stupid?" hissed the cat.

"You are!" the gingerbread girl told him.

"Now, now," said Roxy Foxy, "this is all so upsetting. I'm sure I can figure it out if I can just rest a bit. Why don't you come in, little girl, and we'll talk about it over milk and cookies. You seem sensible."

"Well, I am," said the gingerbread girl. And she went into the cave with the fox.

The other animals waited around outside to see what would happen. Nothing did. When the sky did not fall, but started to get dark instead, they decided to go about their business. No one ever saw the gingerbread girl again.

Moral: Sometimes it is best to wait until you are safe at home before you say "I told you so."

# Heroes Never Say Goodbye

by David Waskin



Cutting dry rot out of an old rowboat isn't the best way to spend a Thursday morning in July. You start to sweat, and sawdust sticks to you, and the saw keeps slipping out of its groove, and you start thinking about how

you would rather be floating on the lake, or walking through the deep northern Michigan woods, or challenging some local kid with a basketball under his arm to a game of one-on-one. At least that's what I was starting to think about. Until I

stopped and remembered why I'd taken up the chore in the first place.

Three weeks earlier I'd gotten a letter from the son of Mike and Bev Halloran, old family friends who had looked after my growing up when my grandfather couldn't. When my grandfather died and I was away at college, it was Mike and Bev who helped me see that everything was properly taken care of. I hadn't felt right about putting my grandfather's house up for sale so soon, and since the Hallorans' eldest daughter had just gotten married, I suggested she and her husband live in the house. We argued about rent, and I finally lost, agreeing to let them pay me for staying there. Once they moved out, the Hallorans' next married daughter moved in, and our arrangement became something of a tradition, finally ending now with their son Ken. He told me in the letter that he had gotten a better job in the Detroit suburbs and that he and his wife had to leave right away. I phoned from my home in Phoenix and told them that if there were no unmarried Hallorans left, it must at last be time for me to sell the place.

It had been a long time since I'd been back to the town of Pine Falls. But July is a good

month to be away from Arizona, and I decided a vacation was in order. I'd found the rowboat in the garage, high in the rafters. Sam and I—my grandfather always had me call him Sam—began building it the last summer of his life, almost fifteen years ago. We never finished. I decided to complete the project. As a long-delayed gesture of goodbye, I think.

So I'd set the boat up behind the house, down near the edge of the lake. I was ramming the saw back and forth with renewed vigor when someone called my name. I stopped and looked up, brushing sawdust from my shorts and T-shirt. Old Ferman Raysher made his way around the side of the house, bent over and moving very slowly.

"Hey," I said, jogging toward him. "Hey, Ferman, what happened?"

"Mitch Travers," he wheezed. "Can you give me a hand?"

His lip was cut and his nose looked broken. He had wiped some of the blood off his face with his shirtsleeves.

"I fell down my stairs." He tried to laugh. "Heard you were coming back. 'It's been a while.'"

I nodded. "Let's get you into the house."

I helped him as we stepped through the porch. Raysher

and Sam went way back. They had both been county inspectors, a pair of hell-raising good ol' boys right up to Sam's death. I'd come to understand through the Hallorans that old Ferm had become a recluse and an alcoholic. He was breathing hard and sucking air through his teeth. I thought smalltalk might help keep his mind off the pain.

"You still have the place next door?" I asked. The houses on the lake are far apart with big trees in between.

"Yeah, I still got it. Word is you're finally putting this one up for sale."

"As soon as I take care of a few things." I got him to the bathroom, wiped at the blood dried on his face.

"What is it you do now, anyways?" he said.

"I'm a private investigator."

He gave a dark-toothed grin. "Digging up people's secrets, eh?"

"Sometimes I bury them."

That sounded more sinister than I intended, but I doubt he cared. "The cut on your lip doesn't look so bad," I said. "But your nose does, and it sounds like you're having trouble breathing. My car's out front, how about I drive you to the hospital?"

I half expected a protest, but he only nodded. When he saw

my four speed Camaro his jaw went a little slack.

"When the hell was that thing washed last?"

"Nineteen seventy-nine," I told him. "The year it was made. I bought it from a guy six years ago on the condition that I wouldn't clean the outside." As I helped him get inside, he stared at me.

"It was the only way he'd sell it," I explained. "A deal is a deal." I pulled out of the driveway and headed south, toward town. The road winds and swirls through heavy trees, and along the way Raysher kept up the talk.

"How about that girl you used to run with, the newspaper writer?"

"Lisa?" I said.

"Yeah. You seen her since you've been back?"

I shook my head, checked the rear view mirror.

"She's married now," he said. "Been married a long time."

"So I hear."

"Kids, too."

"So they tell me."

I turned onto Vernon, the street that makes up two-thirds of the downtown area of Pine Falls. The other part is Tipton Street, which goes east off Vernon, making an "L" shape.

"You married now, Mitch?"

"Nope. You thinking of proposing?"

"No need to get touchy." He leaned his head back and closed his eyes. I drove slowly in moderate traffic. Tourist season was on, but it was still early in the day. I turned onto Tipton, then onto the small street that led to the hospital. Once inside the emergency room we were told to wait, though there were no other patients in sight. We sat, and I asked Raysher if he knew anyone who drove a gray Chevy Impala.

He shook his head.

"Why?"

"One followed us here. The driver looked young, male. Long hair."

"Where is he now?"

"He parked away from us and stayed in his car. I don't know if he's still out there. Would anyone want to follow you, Ferm?"

"Me? I'm a retired old man. Why would anyone want to follow me?"

A nurse appeared, calling his name. I was told I could wait where I was or that there was "a television lounge" down the hall. I wanted to ask why a television would need a lounge, but didn't. I stayed in my chair and ran details through my head. Raysher had smelled of liquor but did not appear drunk, despite his reputation. I wondered if the guy in the Impala beat him up, then spilled booze

on him. Maybe to make it seem more plausible that he fell.

I got up and found a box that sold the local paper, the *Times Herald*. I bought a copy, and when I walked out to toss it in the car, the Impala was gone. But someone had dirtied their finger to write a one-word message on my hood. "Dead."

Back inside, it was forty-five minutes before the nurse reappeared with Raysher. His nose was under a plastic shield, and his shirt bulged over some kind of rib protector.

"He'll be all right," the nurse told me. "He just needs to take it easy for awhile."

"The doc said I was pretty tough," Raysher said. But when we were getting into the car, he saw the word on my hood and turned a shade paler.

No one followed us on the ride back to his place. The noontime sun was bright through the windshield. "Listen, Ferm. It doesn't take a detective to see somebody dished you some pretty good shots. It's all right to admit it. I got a pretty good look at the guy that followed us. We'll go to the cops and have him picked up."

"I told you I fell. It's what I get for nipping at the bottle so early in the morning."

"There's nothing to be afraid of. If you'd just tell me why someone would want to—"



"Maybe it's none of your business."

That chilled the air. He managed to get out of the car on his own. He said, "This is nothing you want to know about, Mitch. Nothing I can't handle."

"It doesn't look like you handled it this morning, Ferman."

I took sandwich fixings and a beer from the refrigerator at the house. Then the beer made me think of Raysher, and I exchanged it for a glass of milk. There had always been a shiftiness to him, even in the old days. Still, Sam had never spoken ill of him, and that was enough to earn him my help. At least until I was sure he wasn't in any danger.

I hadn't gotten the license number of the Impala. But I hoped the driver was local and could be found at one of the town's establishments later in the evening.

I ate my sandwich and wandered through the house, glancing occasionally at the lake. Strange, how you can leave a place and start to imagine it no longer exists. I swam in the lake here, watched Sunday afternoon ball games with Sam, and fell in love with Lisa. But those times seemed distant and unreal, bits of glitter that happened to someone else.

I got the paper I'd picked up

at the hospital and thumbed through it. There was a column by Lisa Sutton, with a picture atop of someone I'd known as Lisa Hayes. The face was gaunter, the features sharper, the hair arranged differently. But it was still very much the Lisa I remembered.

Suddenly I looked at a living room wall. There was a faint crack emerging in the plaster that I'd noticed earlier, without realizing what it was. Now I remembered. It was the culmination of a long conversation I'd had with Sam.

Lisa and I had just broken up. We'd been together long enough out of high school that she wanted to settle down. But she knew I wanted to roam for adventure. I told her the time didn't feel right for marriage. She seemed convinced the time would never feel right to me, and maybe she was right. I told the whole thing to Sam. He listened and told me that if it was over, it was over. And there was nothing I could do except take the hurt. I guess I'd already known that, and in frustration I kicked the wall and put my foot through. Instead of giving me a reprimand I didn't need, Sam just looked at me and nodded. And that was special. Because it was a sign of respect.

I promised to come home



from school the next week and fix the hole, but that night was the last time I saw him alive. I left for school in the morning and got a call three days later. He'd been found by Raysher in the bathroom, killed by a slippery floor and a corner of the sink. The next time I saw the house the hole was repaired.

**A**t ten thirty that night I swung my growling Camaro into the parking lot of Duffy's Tavern. Duffy's was new, as far as I could tell, offering the publike atmosphere that has become so popular the last several years. It had not been there the last time I was in town, and I couldn't remember what it had taken the place of. I drove the parking aisles slowly, looking to both sides.

I didn't find the Impala, and left wondering if my meager quest was only an attempt to serve my conscience. If Ferm didn't want my help, maybe I shouldn't give it. Then again, if a suicide tells you not to talk him out of it, do you say okay and let him jump?

Waiting for a light on Vernon to change, I mentally crossed off the first of three locations I had picked as possibilities. The next place on my list had been a favorite place of Sam's.

The town had changed. The main strip still had a small town atmosphere to it, with quaint shops and little awnings and street lamps styled to look old. But it was more crowded, with many of the signs bigger and louder. I made the turn onto Tipton. The park where I'd first kissed Lisa was on the left. I glanced at it but couldn't see much of it in the dark.

Big Bill's Saloon, in contrast to the downtown, hadn't changed at all. At least not on the outside. A squat brick box with no windows and a dirt lot around back, it used to sell a priceless combination cheap: thick burgers and good beer. I was happy to see that it was still thriving. And as I swung around back, my headlights passed directly over the car I was looking for. I got out and memorized the license number, wondering how much was left of whatever luck I'd saved up over the years.

Inside, a hand clapped my shoulder. Through the smoke and dim lighting, I turned to look at Phil Markata. He had the mustache of a bandit and managed the place for an old man named Teeter.

"Good to see you back, Travers."

"Good to see you, Phil." He was maybe ten years older than I, and in the time since I'd last

seen him, his sunken eyes had sunk deeper and his hair had stayed full and jet black. We shook hands, and he led me to a place at the bar. He asked what I was drinking, and I told him Killian's, in the bottle. I talked standing up, leaning my left elbow on the bar and looking out at the place.

"You look older from close up," he said.

"Thanks."

"But the same from far away, like you were twenty years old. That's how I knew it was you so quick. You still playing?"

He was a jazz buff, and Sam had brought him over one day to hear me play my tenor saxophone.

"I play now and then. Usually a couple of weekends a month."

"Phoenix?"

I nodded.

"I'm no player, Travers, but you had some kind of talent, you know that? You ought to chuck whatever you're doing and move to St. Louis or some place."

"Hey, take it easy. You haven't seen me in years, remember? Maybe I like what I do."

"If it's not the music, then it's not you, Travers. That's what I think. You ought to be doing that full time. Didn't you have a name for your horn?"

"Rosa Lee."

"That wasn't the name of that newspaper girl that you went with, was it?"

"It was the name of a song that came over the radio while I was trying to think of a name for my saxophone, Phil. And if I played full time, I wouldn't be able to pay the bills. Doesn't look like this place is treating you bad," I nodded at the customers. "Teeter making out okay?"

"Died four years ago, and there were six people at the funeral. He willed the place to me."

I let a moment of silence pass. "I hadn't heard," I said.

He went to help someone at the other end, and I fixed my gaze on a far table. I saw the guy.

Phil came back and said, "You still got that look to you, Travers."

"What look is that?"

"Same one Sam had. Like you always want trouble."

I smiled at the timing as the driver of the Impala stood and made a move toward the restroom.

"If you're looking for trouble," I said, quoting Raymond Chandler, "I come from where they make it."

He shook his head, and I slapped him on the arm and asked him if he could keep the

men's room off limits until I came out.

He nodded reluctantly. I followed the guy into the bathroom. He stepped to a urinal, and I had to wait for someone washing his hands to leave. The Impala driver was about twenty years old with hair down to his shoulders, an earring on the left side, a premature mustache, and thick muscle through the shoulders. Maybe six feet tall. The way he carried himself, a real bad-ass.

But you're not half as tough as you think you are when you're taking a piss.

The guy washing his hands had left, and the Impala man looked about ready to zip his fly when I kidney-punched him and then got my best grip on his right ear.

"Tell me why you beat up the old man this morning," I said, pushing him against the cold porcelain, "and you can get out of here in fairly good shape."

He feigned submission, then jabbed his elbow back at me. It missed, and I pulled down on the ear until he moaned.

"Do that again," I said, "and you'll become the Van Gogh of the underworld."

"Huh?"

"What's your name?" I kept steady pressure on the ear.

"Rick."

"Rick what?"

"Rogers. Take it easy."

"Why did you beat him up, Rogers? I'm not going to ask again."

"Look, don't hassle me. A guy I work for, he paid me to do it."

"What guy?"

His breath came hard and fast. "Look, if I tell, he'll—"

I pulled harder and he gasped. "I don't look like a cop because I'm not. If you tell me, you're not going to get in any trouble. But screw me over and I'll go straight to the police, and then your boss, whoever he is, is going to know you have a big mouth."

"Macon Geary."

I knew the name. "Now tell me why."

"All I know is someone told Macon they saw this old guy talking to a reporter about something."

"Who told Macon that?"

"I don't know, another guy that works for him."

"What's his name?"

"I don't know, I just see him around a lot."

"What was the old man talking to the reporter about?"

"I don't know. But when Macon found out, he gave me the address of the guy and told me to scare him. And to tell him that Macon said, 'Remember our deal.'"

"Meaning what?"

"I don't know."

"Why did you follow us to the hospital?"

"I wanted to make sure he was all right. I thought I hurt him too bad. I wasn't supposed to put him in the hospital."

"And you wrote on my car?"

"I thought it would scare him."

"Okay, now do us both a favor and keep your mouth shut about ever having talked to me. And don't forget to zip your fly."

I left him cowering and made straight for the exit, nodding to Phil on my way out.

I woke early Friday morning and forced myself into swim trunks. The air was crisp, and I got into the lake and pushed hard, first fifteen minutes of crawl, then fifteen of backstroke, and finally a set of pushups and situps on the dock. When I had my breath back, I went in for a hot shower, very much alive. I dressed in khakis, boat shoes, and a polo shirt.

All I knew about Macon Geary was that he was a land developer, a local boy who had made it big. I had the idea that he used to live a few miles up the canal that fed into the lake, but I wasn't sure. After a breakfast of cold cereal and half a grapefruit it was just before eight o'clock. I looked for the number for the newspaper

and found out the office didn't open until nine. So I took Rosa Lee out of her case and popped a cassette into my portable tape player. For the next fifty minutes I floated through a jazz-blue heaven, side by side with Miles Davis and John Coltrane, soaring over peaks and dipping into valleys on sounds that touched on every emotion I'd ever felt. When the tape ended, I headed for town, still hearing the music, again feeling alive.

"Well, Lisa Sutton is our managing editor," the receptionist said. "She'd probably be the one you want to talk to."

"I thought Lisa Sutton was a columnist."

"Oh, she is. But she's also managing editor."

I nodded and handed the receptionist my card. She scurried down a short hallway. I hadn't seen Lisa since the day we ended it, and even though I knew it would be all smiles and how-are-you-doings, I couldn't help feeling a bit nervous as I waited.

Lisa came down the hallway looking happy and more than a little surprised. She was tall and still quite thin, wearing jeans, tennis shoes, and a short-sleeved button-down shirt. She opened her arms, and we exchanged a light hug. Her hair was a soft brown, lighter than

it used to be and with more curls. As she led me back to her office I wondered how I looked to her.

"Mitch Travers, Confidential Investigations?" she said, holding my card. "Shouldn't you be in a trenchcoat or something?"

"Well, the P.I. of the nineties. Shouldn't you be chomping a cigar and banging on a Smith-Corona?"

We sat down and she nodded to the word processor on her desk.

"The journalist of the nineties. And since it's a weekly paper that comes out on Thursdays, Friday's a slow day and I can leave my cigar and visor cap at home."

We talked about our jobs. Silence would have been awkward. I told her about how I'd worked in Dallas as an apprentice, then settled into my own business in Phoenix. She told me one thing had led to another at the paper. First, the job as a starting reporter, then a chance at features and a few columns, then if she wanted to move up in salary it was either take an opening for editor or get a job with a bigger paper out of town, which she hadn't wanted to do. I watched her mannerisms, the long, thin fingers gesturing as she spoke; the active, delicate features that made me think her so

pretty. There was the same contradiction to her that I'd noticed in the old days, a strong will mixed with vulnerability in unguarded moments. An aggressiveness that had made her a successful journalist and yet a wariness of the world that had kept her reluctant to venture from her hometown.

As soon as I sensed the smalltalk wearing thin, I told her that my stopping by hadn't been entirely personal. I told her about what had happened with Ferman Raysher. Except that I lied about squeezing the Rogers kid. I told her a twenty had bought me Macon Geary's name.

"Rogers said that Geary wanted to scare Raysher after a reporter talked to him. I wondered what they talked about."

Lisa leaned forward, elbows on her thighs, fingers steepled at the chin. "I have an interview set up with Geary for late this afternoon. And I was the one who talked to Raysher."

"Doesn't anyone else work around here?"

She laughed a little. "This is a small town paper. I'm doing an in-depth profile of Geary because he's local, he's big, and now he's talking political office. With the name he's building in the surrounding areas, he's going to have a good chance at it."

"Did Raysher say anything

that Geary would want to hide?"

She nodded slowly, biting her lip. "I started research on Geary last week. Hanging out at bars where the crowd that works for him hangs out, getting the feel of their attitudes toward him. Most were pretty careful about what they said. But Raysher and I crossed paths, and he told me that when he worked for the county, everyone knew Geary was dirty. Payoffs to builders and inspectors and a lot more. When I pressed him for specifics, he squirmed and dodged. But then he let something slip and he was pretty drunk for it to be intentional, but I'm not sure. Maybe in a way he wanted to tell me. What he said was that Sam dealt Geary some land, just before he died. Land that was worth a lot less than Geary paid him for it."

"Sam?"

"Your Sam." She sighed. "It's really good that you happened to come in. If it turns out that Sam really was . . . involved in something, you should know we're going to write about it."

I gave a laugh, sort of. "Well, Raysher was drunk, right?"

"I haven't had a chance to check it out yet, but at that time I think Geary was building his Pine Cove condominiums." Lisa looked down. "Sam

would have been an inspector on that, right?"

"He might have. But he wasn't the type to take a bribe."

"Do you know of any land he could have sold to Geary?"

I thought and said, "Maybe. But not for any big sum of money."

Her phone rang, and she asked the person to hold. She told me there were some things she had to get back to but asked if I wanted to have lunch. We agreed to meet at Duffy's at twelve thirty.

I had time to drive to the county building. The only land I knew of that Sam had owned was a marshy place he used to take me before I was in high school. We called it the Secret Swamp.

The woman behind the counter was all too eager to help me. She looked maybe forty, with frosted hair and an abundance of makeup. Wide hips and very tight jeans. When I told her I wanted to look at land titles, she gave me a head to toe glance and slowly cocked her right eyebrow. It struck me as so absurd that I turned to see if anyone was behind me. She said, "Looks *and* a sense of humor, all in one."

I sometimes feel forever caught in the bind of not wanting the ones who are attracted to me and of falling in love with

the ones who wouldn't have anything to do with me. I asked again about the land titles. She sort of sighed, like it had been just another failed experiment, and we found what I was after.

The land I'd known as the Secret Swamp had been sold by Sam Travers to Macon Geary on the twenty-seventh of August, 1976. Exact prices are not listed on the deeds, but tax stamps are required. One stamp for every thousand dollars the land sold for. I counted eighty such stamps on the deed. Twice. And hard as I tried, I could not think of any reason for it, other than the one I didn't want to think of.

On my way out I asked the woman if she believed in heroes.

"Well, my first left me pregnant and broke, my second went off with a nurse after he busted his leg, and I was hoping you were the third."

Duffy's wasn't too crowded. I went in at twelve thirty and didn't see Lisa. I got a table, and she showed up fifteen minutes later.

"It goes with the business," she said. "Even on the slow days I have to apologize for being late. I'm sorry. You're looking a little less chipper than this morning."

I told her what I'd found out.

"I've been sitting here spinning it around and around in my head," I said, "and I can't fit it into my image of Sam. But how else do you explain a county inspector getting eighty grand from a land developer? And for a marsh that's probably worth less than a tenth of that?"

She shrugged lightly. We ordered.

"I don't know," I finally said. "Maybe it's the old thing about never really knowing the people closest to us. Or never knowing them completely. Or never knowing more than one side of them."

"You must see a lot of the bad side of people in what you do," Lisa said.

"So now I get a taste of my own medicine? I've done so much prying into other people's lives maybe it serves me right, finding out that the closest thing I have to a hero took a bribe."

"Well, aren't we getting a little ahead of ourselves? I mean, it all happened so long ago. And we don't have any proof."

"No. But if it happened the way it looks, we never will. And if we ask Geary, he'll just tell us he thought there was something of value in the land."

"Do you think there could have been?"



I shook my head. We ate quietly, and when we were almost finished, Lisa asked me why I'd finally come back to Pine Falls.

"All this time," she said, "with no word from you."

"I guess I wanted to get as far from here as I could," I said. "Everything that was good seemed to go bad all at once. We broke up, Sam died, and I just didn't see any point in coming back more than I had to."

"Are things good in Phoenix?"

"Pretty good."

"But no wedding ring?" She smiled.

"The work I do doesn't get along well with family life. I don't plan to be a bachelor forever. But when I do get married, I think I'll have to be away from the business I'm in now."

"You'll be able to do that? Just turn it off and go to something else?"

"If I find the right something else. How about your marriage? Everything okay?"

She sighed. "After all the hectic mornings of getting the kids off to school, the migraines that Matt and I both get from our jobs, underneath all that noise and clatter, yeah, it's really pretty nice."

We talked a bit longer, about nothing that was really important, but I realized how comfortable we were with each

other, and that made me feel good. Before we left, I told her that I was glad we'd been able to talk openly. She put her hand on my arm and said she was, too. We agreed to keep in touch on whatever we found out about Macon Geary. As sometimes happens, the case had taken a quick turn and thrown me. But I felt determined to dust myself off and get back on, no matter how much it hurt. And I still wanted to know what Ferman Raysher had to do with all of it.

I tried calling Raysher from a pay phone downtown, but there was no answer. I tried the Hallorans, and Bev answered. I invited her and Mike over for dinner on Sunday, but she said that she had been trying to reach me all day, that she and Mike were inviting me to their place for Sunday dinner and wouldn't hear of letting me cook for them. I told her she was wise, and she said I should try to make it over around five. I hung up and called the operator for John Drexler's office address. Drexler had been Sam's attorney, and even though Mike Halloran had settled most of the business details with him after Sam's death, I had a vague memory of Drexler's face and his somewhat stiff, nervous manner. I got the address and found the office on

a side street of Tipton just before two o'clock.

It was one of those offices in a house, the kind that makes you wonder what family used to live there, if any. Solid beams of wood held a small roof over the front porch, and embossed overhead were the names Davenzo, McCorken, Lake and Drexler.

I gave the receptionist my card and asked if I could see Mr. Drexler without an appointment. She looked at me kind of funny, cocked her head, and said, "Didn't I used to know you? My name's Peggy Vanderson, used to be Peggy Spitz?"

"Sure, we went to high school together."

She nodded and smiled. "I'll go see if Mr. Drexler's free."

I remembered her not because I'd known her but because some of my friends had. The old joke was, "Do you know Peggy Spitz?"

"No, I thought she just drooled a little."

I felt happy for her that she'd gotten married. She came back and told me Drexler could see me in a few minutes. Peggy and I exchanged a few stories about what had happened to people we'd gone to school with, then Drexler himself walked out and led me back to his office.

He had to be almost fifty and looked good for his age. He was

close to six feet, bearded, and the flecks of gray were just starting to congregate in his hair. He had an odd habit of rubbing the thumb and forefinger of his left hand, as if gesturing for money.

"I remember Sam," he said, sitting down behind his desk. "How can I help you?"

"I wanted to ask you about his estate," I said. "You probably remember that even though I was twenty-one at the time of Sam's death, Mike Halloran handled most of the legal arrangements with you."

He nodded, rubbing his fingers together.

"Mr. Drexler, I want to know if there was a substantial increase in Sam's assets shortly before his death. Say about eighty grand?"

His fingers stopped rubbing.

"I assure you, Mitch," he seemed uncomfortable using my first name, "that you received the full sum of your grandfather's estate."

"I don't doubt that, John. But I'm asking if Sam came into any money just before he died."

He paused again and sighed. "There was a business transaction. Sam sold a parcel of land to Macon Geary."

"For eighty thousand dollars?"

"Yes. It was a cash transaction, and I witnessed it. The

day before he died, Sam told me he'd set up a deal. All he wanted was for me to tend to the standard legal details, which I did."

"So what happened to the money? It wasn't part of my inheritance."

He shook his head. "No one knew what happened to it. It must have been stolen. After Sam's death, it never showed up in any of his assets, in any form. Naturally, I notified the police."

"And?"

"They never found it either."

"Why didn't I know about this?"

He looked away. "That was . . . Mr. Halloran's decision. But the police managed to keep it out of the papers. Since the money was never recovered, there was no point in everyone's knowing about it."

"But you should have told me."

"Would you have wanted to know?"

I had to fight the urge to ball my fists. "Do you think the land Sam sold was worth eighty thousand?"

"I don't think my speculation is really that important. But the transaction itself was legitimate."

After I got out of there, I called Lisa. I told her what Drexler had told me and said

that I wanted to go with her to meet Macon Geary.

"I'm not sure that's such a hot idea, Mitch."

"Why not?"

"He might feel uncomfortable. How would you feel, being interviewed by a reporter *and* a private investigator?"

"Who said anything about telling him what I do? We can say I'm new with the paper. I'll let you do the talking. I just want to get a look at him."

We met at four thirty in the parking lot of the newspaper office. Lisa had changed from jeans to slacks and was no longer in tennis shoes. She stared as I got out of the Camaro.

"What color is that thing?" she said.

"Blue." I think.

She informed me that we would be taking her car. I had to wait while she cleared toys from the passenger seat and tossed them in back. I got in, and we headed north on Vernon. Geary wanted to hold the interview at his house, Lisa said, and it was a good twenty-five minute drive. We didn't talk much, and suddenly I felt old. The Lisa I'd known didn't have kids, and the Sam I'd known didn't take bribes.

We snaked through tall trees on county roads, and I kept my

window down. The smell of the woods was something I'd missed in Arizona. Lisa turned on a narrow dirt road, declared "Private" by a sign tacked to a tree. After a minute the trees thinned, and we were headed up a driveway wider than the road.

The house in front of us sprawled like a spider in the woods. It was a one story house, with rooms and hallways that stretched in different directions. I saw builders at work on an arm that reached off to my left. Two dogs were chasing each other, barking. We parked next to a Corvette and a pickup.

As we got out, a man approached and introduced himself as Macon Geary. He wore work pants and a tank top and was impressively huge. Two twenty, easy. Some of it around his middle, but not all. Veins mapped over his solid arms, and at six one I looked him in the eye. Gray streaked his curly, dark hair, but the only thing that really told his age was the loose, wrinkled skin on his neck. I guessed him for fifty.

"Forgive the clothes," he said, glancing down at his chest. "I find it's good exercise to chop wood in the summer. I also like to stay away from the office on Fridays."

Lisa introduced herself and told him my name. "Mitch

might come to work for us at the paper," she said. "He's going to help take notes and work with me on the story."

"Travers," he said. "Name's familiar. You have family in town?"

"Not any more. But you might have shaken hands with my grandfather once. His name was Sam."

He nodded absently. "Why don't I show you around?"

We followed him around the house, the tank top plastered to his back by a splotch of sweat. It was nearly five, and the shadows were long. "I've got a few acres back here," he said. "My wife and I keep adding onto the house. Kind of our hobby."

Lisa asked him a few questions about growing up in Pine Falls. He gave answers that were short and precise. He had two older sisters; both high achievers in school who pressured him to work hard. He'd gotten along well with his parents, had a dog and a high school sweetheart. Married the sweetheart.

Behind his house was a wide canal that flowed south. At a pause in the interview I asked him if the canal fed into Brindle Lake, where Sam's house was. He said it did. He had two very sharp looking speedboats tied up to a dock.

The answers he gave to questions about current business projects were clear and well phrased. By the time Lisa got to the meat of the interview, we were in an officelike room inside the house. There were no diplomas on the wall, no calendars, photos, or paintings. Only a large clock. He sat behind a bare desk.

"While your competitors admit that you are a superb judge of investments," Lisa said, "you must know there are rumors of your working around the rules."

"Do you mean around the law?"

"Yes."

"I have never broken the law, in business dealings or otherwise. Is there some specific rumor you would like me to comment upon?"

"I don't think so, Mr. Geary. But there was one transaction that we wondered about. Mitch's grandfather, Sam Travers, sold you some land. This was fifteen years ago. According to the records, you appear to have paid much more for that land than it was worth."

He shook his head. "I don't recall the deal."

"It was a marshy place," I said. "Almost swampland, out west of Brindle Lake, down Beck Road."

"There was a police investigation," Lisa added. "Apparently the money you paid to Mr. Travers was stolen. At least, it seemed to disappear."

He inclined his head and looked at the ceiling. "I remember it now. Simply put, that was one of my bigger mistakes. I thought I'd be able to buy the land cheap and build on it. But Mr. Travers drove a hard bargain, and it turned out that my engineers were wrong. The land was no good."

"Wouldn't some people find that hard to believe?" Lisa said. "If you ran for office, a sharp opponent might tell everyone the deal was a good way to cover a bribe to a building inspector."

"That's an insinuation with no basis in fact," Geary said. "A mistake on my part is all it was."

"A mistake you apparently made up for with the success of your Pine Cove condominiums, which were being built at that same time."

He shrugged. "That's true."

She asked him a few more questions, and I kept silent. When the interview was over, he walked us to the car. Lisa thanked him for his time, and when I was reaching to shake his hand, he slapped at my head. My arm shot up and knocked his hand away.

"Easy," he said. "Deerflies are after you."

On the trip back, Lisa asked me what I thought of him.

"He's awfully cool," I said. "Gives all the right answers and handles himself well."

"What about the thing with Ferm Raysher? Why would Geary send that Rogers guy to scare him?"

"I don't know. But I'm going to talk to Ferman again."

When Lisa dropped me at my car, I told her I'd call her if I learned anything new.

"Until then I'll hope not to run into Macon Geary in any dark alleys." I meant it as an exit line, but Lisa looked at me in a thoughtful way.

"Somehow I don't quite believe that," she said. "Maybe that's why it had to end with us."

It shocked me. "What do you mean? We broke up because you think I like violence or something?"

"Don't you?"

I stared at her, at a loss for words.

"I'm sorry, Mitch. It just slipped out. Let's not talk about things that don't matter any more."

She drove off. For the first time it occurred to me that she'd been just as hurt as I. And as I drove back to the house, I realized that a little of the hurt

was still there. Maybe it always would be, for both of us.

At the house I had a small dinner, then walked over to Raysher's place. I knocked and waited. The porchlight came on.

"Who is it?"

"Mitch Travers. I want to talk to you."

Chains rattled, and the door swung open. His eyes were bloodshot.

"What about?"

"First, I wanted to see if you were all right."

He'd taken the plastic shield off his nose. The skin was swollen and purple.

"I'm fine. Thanks." He made a move to close the door.

"Hold on, Ferm. I want to come in and talk. Don't you at least owe me a little courtesy?"

He shrugged and let me in. We sat across from each other on old cushioned chairs in his living room. The only light was a small lamp in the corner. Our shadows were huge on the walls. He had a fifth of something on a nearby end table.

"I've been checking around a little," I said. "It looks like Sam took a bribe from Macon Geary and you knew about it."

The tiny muscles around his eyes twitched, but he said nothing.

"Sam was found dead on August twenty-eighth," I went on,

"which was the day after Geary paid him eighty grand. That eighty grand disappeared."

"So?"

"So you found Sam's body, Ferman. What happened to the money, and what deal did you have with Macon Geary? Share the money and keep quiet about the bribe?"

"You go to hell. Sam was my friend, and I don't steal from my friends."

"Is Macon Geary your friend, Ferm? Then why not tell me about the deal you had with him? Why not tell me why he had someone beat you up?"

He stared at the floor. "Sam was my friend."

"He was mine, too. It's important to me to know what happened. Not just because you're in trouble, but because I have to know if Sam took a bribe."

"You don't have to know. You just *want* to know because you like prying into other people's lives."

"This involves my life, Ferm. And it's important to me that I know."

He wouldn't say anything else. I tried asking a few more times in a few different ways but got nothing. I went back to the house feeling tired and frustrated.

Sleep came easily. I found myself in a dream, watching

Sam chop our rowboat to pieces with an axe. Raysher was there, also watching. He started to walk up behind Sam, and Sam grew eyes in the back of his head. He whirled and swung the axe at Raysher. Raysher disappeared, and Sam stood staring at me. But then he wasn't Sam. He was Macon Geary.

The next morning I couldn't bring myself to work on the rowboat. The chore had gone stale, and quaint little gestures of goodbye seemed pointless. But it had been what Sam and I had worked on at the end of his last summer. At the time the deal with Geary happened. At the time the money disappeared. How had Raysher known about the land deal, anyway? Had Sam told him? Maybe.

I wondered suddenly if Sam really did have eyes in the back of his head. If maybe he'd told Raysher about the money... then realized Raysher couldn't be trusted...

I didn't bother looking again at the rowboat. Eighty grand would take up enough space so that I would have noticed if it was somehow hidden in there. But what about where Sam had stowed the boat? I hurried out to the garage and climbed up into the rafters. There was enough random junk there to



make it a good hiding spot.

Two hours later I'd found nothing but crickets, dust, and more crickets. I remembered what my mentor in the private investigator business had told me: every case has its own pace, its own rhythm. Try to force it and it goes bad.

So maybe I was trying too hard. I spent the rest of the day doing errands and shuffling through a batch of Sam's old financial records that I'd found in the attic. None of them turned out to be important. I talked with a real estate agent about getting the house ready for sale and played my saxophone late into the evening.

On Sunday afternoon I drove to the Hallorans' for dinner. Mike was on the front porch and took his time making fun of my car. He saw the word "dead" still written on the hood, and I told him it was someone's idea of a joke. He put steaks on a grill, and Bev took care of everything else. I was glad they seemed to be doing well. They caught me up on what their kids were up to, and I told them things were fine with me. I'd planned to confront Mike about not telling me about the money and the police investigation of its disappearance. But I finally decided it didn't matter. He'd done what he thought best, and there was

no point in spoiling a fine evening.

As I was getting ready to leave, Bev told me that Ken had wanted her to let me know that he wasn't responsible for the crack in the wall of Sam's living room. I laughed and told them all right, I won't sue. But by the time I got back to the house I was cursing myself for not having thought of it before, and for not seeing how well it fit together.

I kicked it, just like before. The plaster crumpled, and I tore away a huge chunk. A metal briefcase was wedged between the studs.

When Raysher cracked his door to see who it was, I held the briefcase up to him. His eyes widened, and I pushed the door open and went inside.

"It's time to tell me the whole story, Ferman."

"How did you . . . where?"

"I found it. Obviously you've seen it before."

He stared at the briefcase, then moved slowly to his kitchen. I followed and watched him take a bottle of booze from a cupboard.

"Sam came over to show you this after he got it from Geary," I said. "I don't know why. He must have thought he could

trust you. Then he went home and changed his mind, so he hid it. What do you think?"

He sipped from the bottle, his hand shaking.

"If you don't tell me about it," I said, "I'm going to tell Geary that you did. Don't you think he'll be angry that you blew whatever deal you had?"

"You wouldn't do that."

I turned to leave. As I got to the door, I heard his voice from the kitchen.

"Sam came over with the briefcase the night Geary paid him. He opened it for me, and we stared at all that cash. It was a bribe for letting things slide on the Pine Cove condo site."

I went back into the room.

"But he didn't want to keep it," Raysher said, looking up at me. "He'd been drinking because he felt bad. He told me that he knew what he'd done was wrong. He said he was going to turn Geary in, the very next day."

"And?"

"Like you said, he must have gone home and hidden it. Because when Geary came here, he thought I'd taken it."

"What do you mean when Geary came here?"

His voice became so soft and hoarse I had to lean close to understand him. But he told me all of it. With tears running

down his face, he told me what he had been afraid to confess for fifteen years.

When he was done, I told him very carefully what I wanted him to do.

"Call Geary? Mitch, we can't do that, don't you see? He'll—"

"If what you told me is true, he'll come to Sam's house. But you have to say exactly what I tell you to. Now take a minute to pull yourself together."

He did, and made the call. As I was leaving, he grabbed my shoulder.

"I never thought it would turn out the way it did," he said. "Sam was my friend."

Lightning flashed high above as I walked back toward the house. It was five long seconds before the rumble of thunder came, and I was distantly amused at the appropriate timing of the storm. I went to the Camaro and got the gun that I keep tucked in a corner of the trunk. Then I went inside and made sure I had the old ledger book I'd found amongst the financial records in the attic. By the time I settled down to wait, rain was pelting hard against the old house. The minutes passed slowly, punctuated by great crashes of thunder.

It was almost a full hour before Geary arrived. I answered the door with the gun tucked in the back of my pants and the

ledger book in my left hand. I acted surprised to see him, and he said that he'd like to talk. He had on dark pants and a dark sport shirt. I let him in, careful not to let him see the gun.

"I was hoping you could clear something up for me," he said. "It seems Ferm Raysher thinks you've found some money."

"Does that concern you?" We were standing in the living room. I had my back in the direction of the back porch and the lake.

"It concerns me that Ferm thinks you found some kind of journal with it," he said.

"Why?"

"You know damn well why."

"Is it that people might not like to read about how Macon Geary bribed a county official? How that county official told about it in a journal he hid with the money, in case something happened to him?"

"How much do you want for it?"

"I don't know, Macon. What are you willing to pay? Eighty grand?"

He didn't respond. We stared at each other, and I was damned if I was going to say anything more until he did.

Finally he said, "How do I know you won't make a copy of the journal?"

I shrugged. "Maybe you'll

just have to stay awake at night, wondering."

"You don't know what you're getting into."

"I think I do." I tossed the book at him. He caught it with a surprised look. "The pages are empty," I said. "Sam never kept a journal. I just wanted to get you over here. So I had Raysher call you. Just like fifteen years ago, remember?"

He said nothing, and I could not tell what was going on behind his eyes.

"On the night you paid him, Sam had an attack of conscience," I said. "He told Raysher you'd bribed him and that he was going to turn you in. But he must have seen the gleam in old Ferm's eye. Because when Sam came back here, he hid the money. It was in that hole in the wall behind you, by the way."

He glanced over his shoulder. "So? You've got nothing on me."

"No legal evidence," I said. "But I know what happened. Raysher called you after Sam left him. He told you that Sam was going to turn you in. He tried to make you pay him for the warning. But you didn't like that idea, so you came straight here, to Sam's house. And after you were finished here," I said, fighting to control the words, "after you were fin-

ished making it look like a slip and fall, you went over to Raysher's and made a deal with him. That so-called deal was that he keep his mouth shut and you let him live. You had him beat up because you thought he was finally going to talk after all these years. And you know what? You were right." I brought the gun out and aimed it at him.

"You murdered my grandfather."

"No, I didn't."

"Yes, you did. How did it happen, Macon? Didn't he want to listen when you told him to change his mind about turning you in?"

He glared at me with pure hate and said, "You've got it about right. He wouldn't listen to me, so I hit his head on the sink. I had to do it a few times."

I cocked the gun. And the trigger felt good as I started to squeeze. But his eyes focused on something behind me. In the time it takes to blink, I knew how stupid I'd been. I knew that the canal behind Geary's house fed into the lake behind Sam's. And I knew that the thunder might have been enough to cover the sound of a boat, if someone had come down the canal to back Geary up. I'd been too focused on him, too caught up in my own emotions.

I heard the grunt of effort behind me too late. Something blunt hit me and split my head with pain. I rolled on the ground and kept a white-knuckle grip on consciousness. The gun dropped from my hand. The room was on a merry-go-round, and I recognized the face of Rick Rogers. He was holding a wooden club. He let me struggle to my feet before swinging again. I managed to duck and catch him with a left to the stomach. The air went out of him in a burst, but Geary was right there. His fist smashed into my nose and the world melted to a velvety dream. . . .

I found out later that Raysher had called Lisa sometime after I'd left him. She told me that he was almost hysterical but kept saying he wanted everyone to know what happened. When she finally got it out of him, she called the police and told them to get to Sam's house. They arrived without sirens and caught Geary and Rogers beating my head against the wall.

**I**t was four days before they let me leave the hospital. They told me I was lucky to be leaving at all. I spent a day resting at the house, thinking some things through very

carefully. The day after that, I went to Big Bill's Saloon for lunch. It was less crowded than when I'd been there before.

"Quite a story," Phil Markata said, putting the newspaper down.

I nodded. "When are you coming to St. Louis to see me play?"

He looked at me. "You're serious?"

"Why not? I've got a chunk of money that'll last awhile. I can afford to live like a struggling musician, travel to a few cities, see what work I can find."

"You're really serious?"

"I'm really serious. When I was in here before, Phil, you said that I had a look to me. A look that wants trouble. I've been thinking that maybe it's time to change that. Or if I can't change it, then maybe I can get into a business where there's less chance of my getting into *real* trouble. Who knows, maybe I'll even find someone to make Rosa Lee jealous."

"Another saxophone?"

"I was thinking maybe a woman."

"Oh. Like the newspaper woman."

"Right . . . except there won't be another like her."

"Oh. You leaving soon?"

"Pretty soon. The house is up

for sale. There's just one more chore I have to take care of."

It was a rainy morning two days later when I took the rowboat for her maiden voyage. The oars cut the surface of the water and she glided along quite well. It was good exercise.

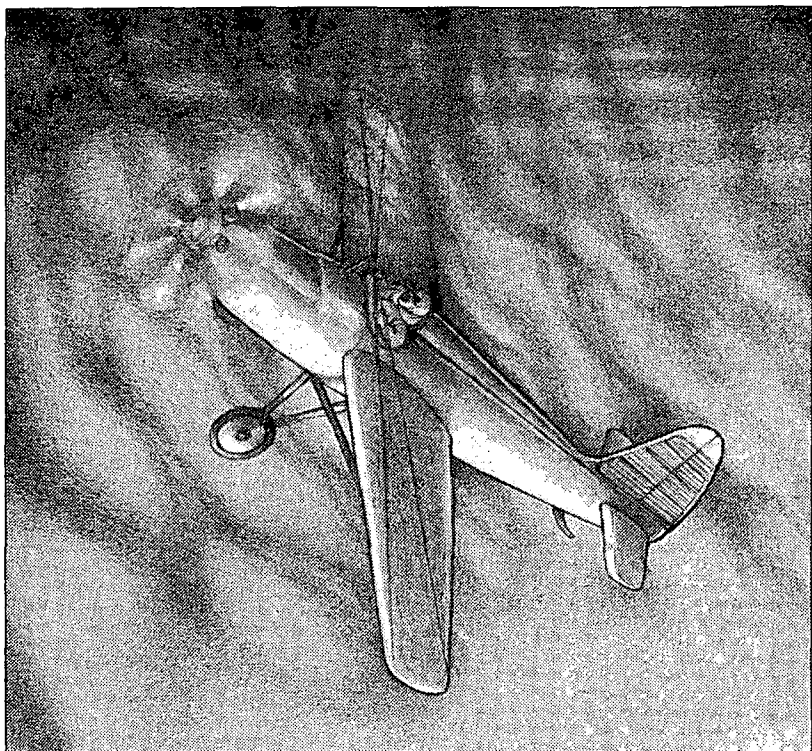
My plan was never to kill Macon Geary. I was going to scare him, then hurt him enough to make myself feel better. But when I had the gun on him and was thinking of what he did to Sam . . . I *wanted* to kill him. And would have, if not for Rogers' hitting me. That realization made me look at a part of myself that I hadn't wanted to look at. A part Lisa had noticed a long time ago.

And I'd discovered a part of Sam I hadn't wanted to see either. I would never know why he took a bribe. But then, I would also never know why my parents died in an accident when I was very young. Maybe we look too hard for answers to things we can't ever understand. Maybe. I don't know.

But at the end of that last summer, that very special time which *still* happened, which is *still* real and untarnished . . . at the end of that time, Sam and I never said goodbye.

Finishing the boat was the least I could do.

MYSTERY CLASSIC



# The Horror of the Heights

by Arthur Conan Doyle

*Illustration by Judy Mitchell*

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**T**he idea that the extraordinary narrative which has been called the Joyce-Armstrong Fragment is an elaborate practical joke evolved by some unknown person, cursed by a perverted and sinister sense of humor, has now been abandoned by all who have examined the matter. The most macabre and imaginative of plotters would hesitate before linking his morbid fancies with the unquestioned and tragic facts which reinforce the statement. Though the assertions contained in it are amazing and even monstrous; it is nonetheless forcing itself upon the general intelligence that they are true, and that we must readjust our ideas to the new situation. This world of ours appears to be separated by a slight and precarious margin of safety from a most singular and unexpected danger. I will endeavor in this narrative, which reproduces the original document in its necessarily somewhat fragmentary form, to lay before the reader the whole of the facts up to date, prefacing my statement by saying that, if there be any who doubt the narrative of Joyce-Armstrong, there can be no question at all as to the facts concerning Lieutenant Myrtle, R.N., and Mr. Hay Connor, who undoubtedly met their end in the manner described.

The Joyce-Armstrong Fragment was found in the field which is called Lower Haycock, lying one mile to the westward of the village of Withyham, upon the Kent and Sussex border. It was on the fifteenth September last that an agricultural laborer, James Flynn, in the employment of Mathew Dodd, farmer, of the Chauntry Farm, Withyham, perceived a briar pipe lying near the footpath which skirts the hedge in Lower Haycock. A few paces farther on he picked up a pair of broken binocular glasses. Finally, among some nettles in the ditch, he caught sight of a flat, canvas-backed book, which proved to be a notebook with detachable leaves, some of which had come loose and were fluttering along the base of the hedge. These he collected, but some, including the first, were never recovered, and leave a deplorable hiatus in this all-important statement. The notebook was taken by the laborer to his master, who in turn showed it to Dr. J. H. Atherton, of Hartfield. This gentleman at once recognized the need for an expert examination, and the manuscript was forwarded to the Aero Club in London, where it now lies.

The first two pages of the manuscript are missing. There is also one torn away at the end of the narrative, though none of these affect the general coherence of the story. It is conjectured that the missing opening is concerned with the record of Mr. Joyce-



Armstrong's qualifications as an aeronaut, which can be gathered from other sources and are admitted to be unsurpassed among the air pilots of England. For many years he has been looked upon as among the most daring and the most intellectual of flying men, a combination which has enabled him to both invent and test several new devices, including the common gyroscopic attachment which is known by his name. The main body of the manuscript is written neatly in ink, but the last few lines are in pencil and are so ragged as to be hardly legible—exactly, in fact, as they might be expected to appear if they were scribbled off hurriedly from the seat of a moving aeroplane. There are, it may be added, several stains, both on the last page and on the outside cover, which have been pronounced by the Home Office experts to be blood—probably human and certainly mammalian. The fact that something closely resembling the organism of malaria was discovered in this blood, and that Joyce-Armstrong is known to have suffered from intermittent fever, is a remarkable example of the new weapons which modern science has placed in the hands of our detectives.

And now a word as to the personality of the author of this epoch-making statement. Joyce-Armstrong, according to the few friends who really knew something of the man, was a poet and a dreamer, as well as a mechanic and an inventor. He was a man of considerable wealth, much of which he had spent in the pursuit of his aeronautical hobby. He had four private aeroplanes in his hangars near Devizes, and is said to have made no fewer than one hundred and seventy ascents in the course of last year. He was a retiring man with dark moods, in which he would avoid the society of his fellows. Captain Dangerfield, who knew him better than anyone, says that there were times when his eccentricity threatened to develop into something more serious. His habit of carrying a shotgun with him in his aeroplane was one manifestation of it.

Another was the morbid effect which the fall of Lieutenant Myrtle had upon his mind. Myrtle, who was attempting the height record, fell from an altitude of something over thirty thousand feet. Horrible to narrate, his head was entirely obliterated, though his body and limbs preserved their configuration. At every gathering of airmen, Joyce-Armstrong, according to Dangerfield, would ask, with an enigmatic smile: "And where, pray, is Myrtle's head?"

On another occasion after dinner, at the mess of the Flying School on Salisbury Plain, he started a debate as to what will be the most permanent danger which airmen will have to encounter.

Having listened to successive opinions as to air pockets, faulty construction, and over-banking, he ended by shrugging his shoulders and refusing to put forward his own views, though he gave the impression that they differed from many advanced by his companions.

It is worth remarking that after his own complete disappearance it was found that his private affairs were arranged with a precision which may show that he had a strong premonition of disaster. With these essential explanations I will now give the narrative exactly as it stands, beginning at page three of the bloodsoaked notebook:

“Nevertheless, when I dined at Rheims with Coselli and Gustav Raymond I found that neither of them was aware of any particular danger in the higher layers of the atmosphere. I did not actually say what was in my thoughts, but I got so near to it that if they had any corresponding idea they could not have failed to express it. But then they are two empty, vainglorious fellows with no thought beyond seeing their silly names in the newspaper. It is interesting to note that neither of them had ever been much beyond the twenty thousand foot level. Of course, men have been higher than this both in balloons and in the ascent of mountains. It must be well above the point that the aeroplane enters the danger zone—always presuming that my premonitions are correct.

“Aeroplaning has been with us now for more than twenty years, and one might well ask: Why should this peril be only revealing itself in our day? The answer is obvious. In the old days of weak engines, when a hundred horsepower Gnome or Green was considered ample for every need, the flights were very restricted. Now that three hundred horsepower is the rule rather than the exception, visits to the upper layers have become easier and more common. Some of us can remember how, in our youth, Garros made a worldwide reputation by attaining nineteen thousand feet, and it was considered a remarkable achievement to fly over the Alps. Our standard now has been immeasurably raised, and there are twenty high flights for one in former years. Many of them have been undertaken with impunity. The thirty thousand foot level has been reached time after time with no discomfort beyond cold and asthma. What does this prove? A visitor might descend upon this planet a thousand times and never see a tiger. Yet tigers exist, and if he chanced to come down into a jungle he might be devoured. There are jungles of the upper air, and there are worse things than

tigers which inhabit them. I believe in time they will map these jungles accurately out. Even at the present moment I could name two of them. One of them lies over the Pau-Biarritz district of France. Another is just over my head as I write here in my house in Wiltshire. I rather think there is a third in the Homburg-Wiesbaden district.

"It was the disappearance of the airmen that first set me thinking. Of course, everyone said that they had fallen into the sea, but that did not satisfy me at all. First, there was Verrier in France; his machine was found near Bayonne, but they never got his body. There was the case of Baxter also, who vanished, though his engine and some of the iron fixings were found in a wood in Leicestershire. In that case, Dr. Middleton, of Amesbury, who was watching the flight with a telescope, declares that just before the clouds obscured the view he saw the machine, which was at an enormous height, suddenly rise perpendicularly upwards in a succession of jerks in a manner that he would have thought to be impossible. That was the last seen of Baxter. There was a correspondence in the papers, but it never led to anything. There were several other similar cases, and then there was the death of Hay Connor. What a cackle there was about an unsolved mystery of the air, and what columns in the halfpenny papers, and yet how little was ever done to get to the bottom of the business! He came down in a tremendous vol-plané from an unknown height. He never got off his machine and died in his pilot's seat. Died of what? 'Heart disease,' said the doctors. Rubbish! Hay Connor's heart was as sound as mine is. What did Venables say? Venables was the only man who was at his side when he died. He said that he was shivering and looked like a man who had been badly scared. 'Died of fright,' said Venables, but could not imagine what he was frightened about. Only said one word to Venables, which sounded like 'Monstrous.' They could make nothing of that at the inquest. But I could make something of it. Monsters! That was the last word of poor Harry Hay Connor. And he *did* die of fright, just as Venables thought.

"And then there was Myrtle's head. Do you really believe—does anybody really believe—that a man's head could be driven clean into his body by the force of a fall? Well, perhaps it may be possible, but I, for one, have never believed that it was so with Myrtle. And the grease upon his clothes—'all slimy with grease,' said somebody at the inquest. Queer that nobody got thinking after that! I did—but, then, I had been thinking for a good long time. I've made

three ascents—how Dangerfield used to chaff me about my shotgun—but I've never been high enough. Now, with this new, light Paul Veroner machine and its one hundred and seventy-five Robur, I should easily touch the thirty thousand tomorrow. I'll have a shot at the record. Maybe I shall have a shot at something else as well. Of course it's dangerous. If a fellow wants to avoid danger, he had best keep out of flying altogether and subside finally into flannel slippers and a dressing gown. But I'll visit the air-jungle tomorrow—and if there's anything there I shall know it. If I return, I'll find myself a bit of a celebrity. If I don't this notebook may explain what I am trying to do, and how I lost my life in doing it. But no drivell about accidents or mysteries, if you please.

"I chose my Paul Veroner monoplane for the job. There's nothing like a monoplane when real work is to be done. Beaumont found that out in very early days. For one thing it doesn't mind damp, and the weather looks as if we should be in the clouds all the time. It's a bonny little model and answers my hand like a tender-mouthed horse. The engine is a ten-cylinder rotary Robur working up to one hundred and seventy-five. It has all the modern improvements—enclosed fuselage, high-curved landing skids, brakes, gyroscopic steadiers, and three speeds, worked by an alteration of the angle of the planes upon the Venetian blind principle. I took a shotgun with me and a dozen cartridges filled with buckshot. You should have seen the face of Perkins, my old mechanic, when I directed him to put them in. I was dressed like an Arctic explorer, with two jerseys under my overalls, thick socks inside my padded boots, a storm cap with flaps, and my talc goggles. It was stifling outside the hangars, but I was going for the summit of the Himalayas, and had to dress for the part. Perkins knew there was something on and implored me to take him with me. Perhaps I should if I were using the biplane, but a monoplane is a one-man show—if you want to get the last foot of life out of it. Of course I took an oxygen bag; the man who goes for the altitude record without one will either be frozen or smothered—or both.

"I had a good look at the planes, the rudder bar, and the elevating lever before I got in. Everything was in order so far as I could see. Then I switched on my engine and found that she was running sweetly. When they let her go, she rose almost at once upon the lowest speed. I circled my home field once or twice just to warm her up, and then with a wave to Perkins and the others, I flattened out my planes and put her on her highest. She skimmed like a

swallow downwind for eight or ten miles until I turned her nose up a little and she began to climb in a great spiral for the cloudbank above me. It's all-important to rise slowly and adapt yourself to the pressure as you go.

"It was a close, warm day for an English September, and there was the hush and heaviness of impending rain. Now and then there came sudden puffs of wind from the southwest—one of them so gusty and unexpected that it caught me napping and turned me half-round for an instant. I remember the time when gusts and winds and air pockets used to be things of danger—before we learned to put an overmastering power into our engines. Just as I reached the cloudbanks, with the altimeter marking three thousand, down came the rain. My word, how it poured! It drummed upon my wings and lashed against my face, blurring my glasses so that I could hardly see. I got down onto a low speed, for it was painful to travel against it. As I got higher it became hail, and I had to turn tail to it. One of my cylinders was out of action—a dirty plug, I should imagine, but still I was rising steadily with plenty of power. After a bit the trouble passed, whatever it was, and I heard the full, deep-throated purr—the ten singing as one. That's where the beauty of our modern silencers comes in. We can at last control our engines by ear. How they squeal and squeak and sob when they are in trouble! All those cries for help were wasted in the old days, when every sound was swallowed up by the monstrous racket of the machine. If only the early aviators could come back to see the beauty and perfection of the mechanisms which have been bought at the cost of their lives!

"About nine thirty I was nearing the clouds. Down below me, all blurred and shadowed with rain, lay the vast expanse of Salisbury Plain. Half a dozen flying machines were doing hackwork at the thousand foot level, looking like little black swallows against the green background. I dare say they were wondering what I was doing up in cloud land. Suddenly a grey curtain drew across beneath me and the wet folds of vapors were swirling round my face. It was clammy cold and miserable. But I was above the hailstorm, and that was something gained. The cloud was as dark and thick as a London fog. In my anxiety to get clear, I cocked her nose up until the automatic alarm bell rang, and I actually began to slide backwards. My sopped and dripping wings had made me heavier than I thought, but presently I was in lighter cloud, and soon had cleared the first layer. There was a second—opal-colored and

fleecy—at a great height above my head, a white, unbroken ceiling above, and a dark, unbroken floor below, with the monoplane laboring upwards upon a vast spiral between them. It is deadly lonely in these cloud-spaces. Once a great flight of some small waterbirds went past me, flying very fast to the westwards. The quick whirl of their wings and their musical cry were cheery to my ear. I fancy that they were teal, but I am a wretched zoologist. Now that we humans have become birds, we must really learn to know our brethren by sight.

“The wind down beneath me whirled and swayed the broad cloud-plain. Once a great eddy formed in it, a whirlpool of vapor, and through it, as down a funnel, I caught sight of the distant world. A large white biplane was passing at a vast depth beneath me. I fancy it was the morning mail service betwixt Bristol and London. Then the drift swirled inwards again and the great solitude was unbroken.

“Just after ten I touched the lower edge of the upper cloud stratum. It consisted of fine diaphanous vapor drifting swiftly from the westwards. The wind had been steadily rising all this time and it was now blowing a sharp breeze—twenty-eight an hour by my gauge. Already it was very cold, though my altimeter only marked nine thousand. The engines were working beautifully, and we went droning steadily upwards. The cloud-bank was thicker than I had expected, but at last it thinned out into a golden mist before me, and then in an instant I had shot out from it, and there was an unclouded sky and a brilliant sun above my head—all blue and gold above, all shining silver below, one vast, glimmering plain as far as my eyes could reach. It was a quarter past ten o’clock, and the barograph needle pointed to twelve thousand eight hundred. Up I went and up, my ears concentrated upon the deep purring of my motor, my eyes busy always with the watch, the revolution indicator, the petrol level, and the oil pump. No wonder aviators are said to be a fearless race. With so many things to think of there is no time to trouble about oneself. About this time I noted how unreliable is the compass when above a certain height from earth. At fifteen thousand feet mine was pointing east and a point south. The sun and the wind gave me my true bearings.

“I had hoped to reach an eternal stillness in these high altitudes, but with every thousand feet of ascent the gale grew stronger. My machine groaned and trembled in every joint and rivet as she faced it, and swept away like a sheet of paper when I banked her on the

turn, skimming downwind at a greater pace, perhaps, than ever mortal man has moved. Yet I had always to turn again and tack up in the wind's eye, for it was not merely a height record that I was after. By all my calculations it was above little Wiltshire that my air-jungle lay, and all my labor might be lost if I struck the outer layers at some farther point.

"When I reached the nineteen thousand foot level, which was about midday; the wind was so severe that I looked with some anxiety to the stays of my wings, expecting momentarily to see them snap or slacken. I even cast loose the parachute behind me, and fastened its hook into the ring of my leathern belt, so as to be ready for the worst. Now was the time when a bit of scamped work by the mechanic is paid for by the life of the aeronaut. But she held together bravely. Every cord and strut was humming and vibrating like so many harpstrings, but it was glorious to see how, for all the beating and the buffeting, she was still the conqueror of Nature and the mistress of the sky. There is surely something divine in man himself that he should rise so superior to such unselfish, heroic devotion as this air conquest has shown. Talk of human degeneration! When has such a story as this been written in the annals of our race?

"These were the thoughts in my head as I climbed that monstrous, inclined plane with the wind sometimes beating in my face and sometimes whistling behind my ears, while the cloud-land beneath me fell away to such a distance that the folds and hummocks of silver had all smoothed out into one flat, shining plain. But suddenly I had a horrible and unprecedented experience. I have known before what it is to be in what our neighbors have called a *tourbillon*, but never on such a scale as this. That huge, sweeping river of wind of which I have spoken had, as it appears, whirlpools within it which were as monstrous as itself. Without a moment's warning I was dragged suddenly into the heart of one. I spun round for a minute or two with such velocity that I almost lost my senses, and then fell suddenly, left wing foremost, down the vacuum funnel in the center. I dropped like a stone, and lost nearly a thousand feet. It was only my belt that kept me in my seat, and the shock and breathlessness left me hanging half-insensible over the side of the fuselage. But I am always capable of a supreme effort—it is my one great merit as an aviator. I was conscious that the descent was slower. The whirlpool was a cone rather than a funnel, and I had come to the apex. With a terrific wrench,



throwing my weight all to one side, I leveled my planes and brought her head away from the wind. In an instant I had shot out of the eddies and was skimming down the sky. Then, shaken but victorious, I turned her nose up and began once more my steady grind on the upward spiral. I took a large sweep to avoid the danger spot of the whirlpool, and soon I was safely above it. Just after one o'clock I was twenty-one thousand feet above the sea level. To my great joy I had topped the gale, and with every hundred feet of ascent the air grew stiller. On the other hand, it was very cold, and I was conscious of that peculiar nausea which goes with rarefaction of the air. For the first time I unscrewed the mouth of my oxygen bag and took an occasional whiff of the glorious gas. I could feel it running like a cordial through my veins, and I was exhilarated almost to the point of drunkenness. I shouted and sang as I soared upwards into the cold, still outer world.

"It is very clear to me that the insensibility which came upon Glaisher, and in a lesser degree upon Coxwell, when, in 1862, they ascended in a balloon to the height of thirty thousand feet, was due to the extreme speed with which a perpendicular ascent is made. Doing it at an easy gradient and accustoming oneself to the lessened barometric pressure by slow degrees, there are no dreadful symptoms. At the same great height I found that even without my oxygen inhaler I could breathe without undue distress. It was bitterly cold, however, and my thermometer was at zero, Fahrenheit. At one thirty I was nearly seven miles above the surface of the earth, and still ascending steadily. I found, however, that the rarefied air was giving markedly less support to my planes, and that my angle of ascent had to be considerably lowered in consequence. It was already clear that even with my light weight and strong engine-power there was a point in front of me where I should be held. To make matters worse, one of my sparking-plugs was in trouble again and there was intermittent misfiring in the engine. My heart was heavy with the fear of failure.

"It was about that time that I had a most extraordinary experience. Something whizzed past me in a trail of smoke and exploded with a loud, hissing sound, sending forth a cloud of steam. For the instant I could not imagine what had happened. Then I remembered that the earth is forever being bombarded by meteor stones, and would be hardly inhabitable were they not in nearly every case turned to vapor in the outer layers of the atmosphere. Here is a new danger for the high altitude man, for two others passed

me when I was nearing the forty thousand foot mark. I cannot doubt that at the edge of the earth's envelope the risk would be a very real one.

"My barograph needle marked forty-one thousand three hundred when I became aware that I could go no farther. Physically, the strain was not as yet greater than I could bear, but my machine had reached its limit. The attenuated air gave no firm support to the wings, and the least tilt developed into sideslip, while she seemed sluggish on her controls. Possibly, had the engine been at its best, another thousand feet might have been within our capacity, but it was still misfiring, and two out of the ten cylinders appeared to be out of action. If I had not already reached the zone for which I was searching, then I should never see it upon this journey. But was it not possible that I had attained it? Soaring in circles like a monstrous hawk upon the forty thousand foot level, I let the monoplane guide herself, and with my Mannheim glass I made a careful observation of my surroundings. The heavens were perfectly clear; there was no indication of those dangers which I had imagined.

"I have said that I was soaring in circles. It struck me suddenly that I would do well to take a wider sweep and open up a new air tract. If the hunter entered an earth-jungle, he would drive through it if he wished to find his game. My reasoning had led me to believe that the air-jungle which I had imagined lay somewhere over Wiltshire. This should be to the south and west of me. I took my bearings from the sun, for the compass was hopeless and no trace of earth was to be seen—nothing but the distant, silver cloud-plain. However, I got my direction as best I might and kept her head straight to the mark. I reckoned that my petrol supply would not last for more than another hour or so, but I could afford to use it to the last drop, since a single magnificent vol-plané could at any time take me to the earth.

"Suddenly I was aware of something new. The air in front of me had lost its crystal clearness. It was full of long, ragged wisps of something which I can only compare to very fine cigarette smoke. It hung about in wreaths and coils, turning and twisting slowly in the sunlight. As the monoplane shot through it, I was aware of a faint taste of oil upon my lips, and there was a greasy scum upon the woodwork of the machine. Some infinitely fine organic matter appeared to be suspended in the atmosphere. There was no life there. It was inchoate and diffuse, extending for many square acres

and then fringing off into the void. No, it was not life. But might it not be the remains of life? Above all, might it not be the food of life, monstrous life, even as the humble grease of the ocean is the food for the mighty whale? The thought was in my mind when my eyes looked upwards and I saw the most wonderful vision that ever man has seen. Can I hope to convey it to you even as I saw it myself last Thursday?

"Conceive a jellyfish such as sails in our summer seas, bell-shaped and of enormous size—far larger, I should judge, than the dome of St. Paul's. It was of a light pink color veined with a delicate green, but the whole huge fabric so tenuous that it was but a fairy outline against the dark blue sky. It pulsed with a delicate and regular rhythm. From it there depended two long, drooping, green tentacles, which swayed slowly backwards and forwards. This gorgeous vision passed gently with noiseless dignity over my head, as light and fragile as a soap bubble, and drifted upon its stately way.

"I had half turned my monoplane, that I might look after this beautiful creature, when, in a moment, I found myself amidst a perfect fleet of them, of all sizes, but none so large as the first. Some were quite small, but the majority about as big as an average balloon, and with much the same curvature at the top. There was in them a delicacy of texture and coloring which reminded me of the finest Venetian glass. Pale shades of pink and green were the prevailing tints, but all had a lovely iridescence where the sun shimmered through their dainty forms. Some hundreds of them drifted past me, a wonderful fairy squadron of strange unknown argosies of the sky—creatures whose forms and substance were so attuned to these pure heights that one could not conceive anything so delicate within actual sight or sound of earth.

"But soon my attention was drawn to a new phenomenon—the serpents of the outer air. These were long, thin, fantastic coils of vapor-like material, which turned and twisted with great speed, flying round and round at such a pace that the eyes could hardly follow them. Some of these ghostlike creatures were twenty or thirty feet long, but it was difficult to tell their girth, for their outline was so hazy that it seemed to fade away into the air around them. These air-snakes were of a very light grey or smoke color, with some darker lines within, which gave the impression of a definite organism. One of them whisked past my very face, and I was conscious of a cold, clammy contact, but their composition was so unsubstantial that I could not connect them with any thought

of physical danger, any more than the beautiful bell-like creatures which had preceded them. There was no more solidity in their frames than in the floating spume from a broken wave.

"But a more terrible experience was in store for me. Floating downwards from a great height there came a purplish patch of vapor, small as I saw it first, but rapidly enlarging as it approached me, until it appeared to be hundreds of square feet in size. Though fashioned of some transparent, jelly-like substance, it was nonetheless of much more definite outline and solid consistence than anything which I had seen before. There were more traces, too, of a physical organization, especially two vast, shadowy, circular plates upon either side, which may have been eyes, and a perfectly solid white projection between them which was as curved and cruel as the beak of a vulture.

"The whole aspect of this monster was formidable and threatening, and it kept changing its color from a very light mauve to a dark, angry purple so thick that it cast a shadow as it drifted between my monoplane and the sun. On the upper curve of its huge body there were three great projections which I can only describe as enormous bubbles, and I was convinced as I looked at them that they were charged with some extremely light gas which served to buoy up the misshapen and semi-solid mass in the rarefied air. The creature moved swiftly along, keeping pace easily with the monoplane, and for twenty miles or more it formed my horrible escort, hovering over me like a bird of prey which is waiting to pounce. Its method of progression—done so swiftly that it was not easy to follow—was to throw out a long, glutinous streamer in front of it, which in turn seemed to draw forward the rest of the writhing body. So elastic and gelatinous was it that never for two successive minutes was it the same shape, and yet each change made it more threatening and loathsome than the last.

"I knew that it meant mischief. Every purple flush of its hideous body told me so. The vague, goggling eyes which were turned always upon me were cold and merciless in their viscid hatred. I dipped the nose of my monoplane downwards to escape it. As I did so, as quick as a flash there shot out a long tentacle from this mass of floating blubber, and it fell as light and sinuous as a whiplash across the front of my machine. There was a loud hiss as it lay for a moment across the hot engine, and it whisked itself into the air again, while the huge, flat body drew itself together as if in sudden pain. I dipped to a vol-piqué, but again a tentacle fell over the

monoplane and was shorn off by the propeller as easily as it might have cut through a smoke wreath. A long, gliding, sticky, serpentlike coil came from behind and caught me round the waist, dragging me out of the fuselage. I tore at it, my fingers sinking into the smooth, gluelike surface, and for an instant I disengaged myself, but only to be caught round the boot by another coil, which gave me a jerk that tilted me almost onto my back.

"As I fell over I blazed both barrels of my gun, though, indeed, it was like attacking an elephant with a pea-shooter to imagine that any human weapon could cripple that mighty bulk. And yet I aimed better than I knew, for, with a loud report, one of the great blisters upon the creature's back exploded with the puncture of the buckshot. It was very clear that my conjecture was right, and that these vast, clear bladders were distended with some lifting gas, for in an instant the huge, cloudlike body turned sideways, writhing desperately to find its balance, while the white beak snapped and gaped in horrible fury. But already I had shot away on the steepest glide that I dared to attempt, my engine still full on, the flying propeller and the force of gravity shooting me downwards like an aerolite. Far behind me I saw a dull, purplish smudge growing swiftly smaller and merging into the blue sky behind it. I was safe out of the deadly jungle of the outer air.

"Once out of danger I throttled my engine, for nothing tears a machine to pieces quicker than running on full power from a height. It was a glorious, spiral vol-plané from nearly eight miles of altitude—first, to the level of the silver cloudbank, then to that of the stormcloud beneath it, and finally, in beating rain, to the surface of the earth. I saw the Bristol Channel beneath me as I broke from the clouds, but having still some petrol in my tank, I got twenty miles inland before I found myself stranded in a field half a mile from the village of Ashcombe. There I got three tins of petrol from a passing motorcar, and at ten minutes past six that evening I alighted gently in my own home meadow at Devizes, after such a journey as no mortal upon earth has ever yet taken and lived to tell the tale. I have seen the beauty and I have seen the horror of the heights—and greater beauty or greater horror than that is not within the ken of man.

"And now it is my plan to go once again before I give my results to the world. My reason for this is that I must surely have something to show by way of proof before I lay such a tale before my fellowmen. It is true that others will soon follow and will confirm

what I have said, and yet I should wish to carry conviction from the first. Those lovely iridescent bubbles of the air should not be hard to capture. They drift slowly upon their way, and the swift monoplane could intercept their leisurely course. It is likely enough that they would dissolve in the heavier layers of the atmosphere, and that some small heap of amorphous jelly might be all that I should bring to earth with me. And yet something there would surely be by which I could substantiate my story. Yes, I will go, even if I run a risk by doing so. These purple horrors would not seem to be numerous. It is probable that I shall not see one. If I do, I shall dive at once. At the worst there is always the shotgun and my knowledge of . . .”

Here a page of the manuscript is unfortunately missing. On the next page is written, in large, straggling writing:

“Forty-three thousand feet. I shall never see earth again. They are beneath me, three of them. God help me; it is a dreadful death to die!”

Such in its entirety is the Joyce-Armstrong Statement. Of the man nothing has since been seen. Pieces of his shattered monoplane have been picked up in the preserves of Mr. Budd-Lushington upon the borders of Kent and Sussex, within a few miles of the spot where the notebook was discovered. If the unfortunate aviator's theory is correct that this air-jungle, as he called it, existed only over the southwest of England, then it would seem that he had fled from it at the full speed of his monoplane, but had been overtaken and devoured by these horrible creatures at some spot in the outer atmosphere above the place where the grim relics were found. The picture of that monoplane skimming down the sky, with the nameless terrors flying as swiftly beneath it and cutting it off always from the earth while they gradually closed in upon their victim, is one upon which a man who valued his sanity would prefer not to dwell. There are many, as I am aware, who still jeer at the facts which I have here set down, but even they must admit that Joyce-Armstrong has disappeared, and I would commend to them his own words: “This notebook may explain what I am trying to do, and how I lost my life in doing it. But no drivel about accidents or mysteries, if *you* please.”



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# BOOKED & PRINTED

by Carol Harper



Illustration by Sallie Gregory

**W**hy would anyone kidnap two Scottish fold (cat) library mascots from the floor of the ABA convention in Las Vegas? And why would anyone kill the publisher of PennyRoyal books, an imprint that specialized in medical horror? That is the task confronting Detective Lieutenant Molina of the Las Vegas PD, publicist Temple Barr of the convention center, and Midnight Louie, a black tomcat of indeterminate heritage but infinite detective skill in **Catnap** by Carole Nelson Douglas (Tor, \$17.95, 256 pp). Naturally, Midnight Louie, who narrates approximately half the book, has it over the two lady investigators, but he takes pity on them and leads them to the solution.

Helen West and Geoffrey Bailey are back in their starring roles in Frances Fyfield's Silver Dagger winner, **Deep Sleep** (Pocket, \$18, 227 pp). The wife of a pharmacist has died, apparently of natural causes. But the pharmacist is not all that he seems, and the death may not be natural as well. Helen is investigating even though Geoffrey and her boss find it a waste of time.

E. X. Ferrars' latest, **Danger from the Dead** (Doubleday Perfect Crime, \$18.50, 188 pp) has Gavin Cleaver discovering the bodies of his sister-in-law and her sister when he accepts his brother's invitation to holiday at their country home. How could the sister-in-law, crippled with a stroke, have possibly murdered her sister? But that is what it looks like, and Nigel, Gavin's brother, appears to want to let the issue lie.

Jan Roberts' first novel is **A Blood Affair** (Simon & Schuster, \$20, 300 pp). In it, a British woman is raped in an American beauty salon during a robbery. The rapist then is murdered by one of the

robbers. She has no memory of most of the event and is no help to the police. As she begins to recover her memory, however, she is in danger—but from what quarter? When she finds out about her new husband's background, she begins to have even more concerns—he is a Mafioso and may pose even more of a threat than the robber.

S. T. Haymon brings back Detective-Inspector Benjamin Jurnet of the Angleby C.I.D. and his beloved Miriam, home from her travels to Israel, in **Death of a Warrior Queen** (St. Martin's, \$17.95, 224 pp). Jurnet and Miriam are trying to reestablish their relationship when he is called to Lanthrop, a seaside village which is the site of a pre-Roman archaeological dig. His advice on securing the site is wanted, but Jurnet really gets involved when, after a picnic in the dunes, he and Miriam discover the mummified body of a village resident. The love affair must take a back burner while Jurnet tries to sort out the suspects and the victims: the mentally retarded son of the murder victim, his employer, who owns the paddock where the dig is taking place, the volunteers on the dig, and the head archaeologist. Queen Boudica's husband's tombstone, a druid sacred grove, and a treasure trove of gold all complicate the story.

Laura Frankos brings us another archaeological dig in **St. Oswald's Niche** (Ivy, \$3.99, 309 pp). The heroine is an American who has moved in with other graduate students at a trio of archaeological sites in York, England. Simultaneously, a Viking, a Roman, and an early Christian dig are being conducted at various places in that historic city, but artifacts are disappearing. Having been hired to help write up the early Christian dig, which has been looking for the relics of St. Oswald in the foundations of the cathedral, Jennet Walker finds herself the prime suspect in the thefts. She is being set up, but why? Jennet and several of the students investigate.

Religion plays a major role in D. M. Greenwood's **Clerical Errors** (St. Martin's, \$17.95, 216 pp). Deaconess Theodora Braithwaite must deal with her capricious and unfair superior, Canon Wheeler, in the running of the Medewich Cathedral. When a young secretarial candidate finds a severed head on the chapel altar, however, Theodora and her secular peer, Ian Caretaker, begin to investigate. Finding Canon Wheeler interfering at every turn isn't surprising; finding him dead is complicating. The workings of a modern British cathedral make an excellent backdrop for this pas-

sionate and sacrilegious murder.

Do you like classic cars? How about a 1928 Dusenbergs SJ? How would you feel if it were stolen and you were called in to find the car before your employer, an insurance company who is in for a quarter of a million dollars, has to pay off? That is the situation Hobart ("Bart") Lindsey, ace investigator for International Surety, finds himself in in **The Classic Car Killer** by Richard A. Lupoff (Bantam, \$4.99, 272 pp), set in Oakland, California, and the suburbs to the east. To make matters worse, his immediate superior resents his success on his previous case (*The Comic Book Killer*, Bantam). Bart must track down the car thief, recover the car (and his job), and sort out life with his befogged mother, who still lives in the 1950's, and his cop-girlfriend.

Greta Garbo as a detective? Why not? George Baxt has put together another Hollywood detective story from the golden days of that glitzy town in **The Greta Garbo Murder Case** (St. Martin's, \$17.95, 208 pp). Nazi spies, exotic poisons, and the doings of Peter Lorre, William Randolph Hearst, Marion Davies, and, of course, Miss Garbo and her entourage of expatriates and refugees interact with the filming of a fictionalized *Joan of Arc* in January, 1942.

C. R. Cambray's **Conditioned to Death** (Pocket, \$4.99, 130 pp) uses the "typical" American's obsession with fitness and health as a background for murder in a health club. Owner and instructor Dawn Gary has had a hard time of it, but she and her partner, Peter, are finally making a go of SHAPE. Unfortunately, she had to fire an instructor because he made unwanted sexual advances to two of the female customers. And now those women have been found dead, both by drowning. Is the fired instructor getting even, not only by killing his accusers but also by staining the reputation of SHAPE? Dawn cannot leave the investigation alone, especially as more and more of her life starts to unravel. There's a little bit of the "had I but known" feeling here in a classic use of an amateur sleuth "who detects to clear herself." Not very many likeable characters in this book, but then, very few obsessed people are likeable.

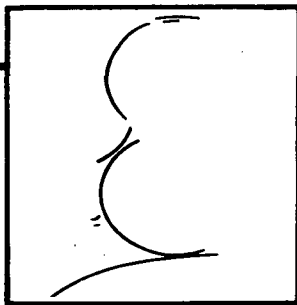
Valerie Frankel returns with **Murder on Wheels** (Pocket, \$4.50, 202 pp). The narrator, Wanda Mallory, owner of the Do It Right Detective Agency, is mourning her failed love affair and a general lack of casework. In walks a biker who wants her to go undercover as a dealer at a gambling club run by gang leader Strom Bismark. Who should she meet there but her ex. Strom's old dealer is dead, and more people are going to die soon, especially

since Strom owes the mob some money. Again, a cast of unlikeable people, with a detective whose mind seems to be set on sex and its various kinky permutations. But the book moves quickly, and the whodunit part is well defined.

Mary Daheim is specializing in bed-and-breakfast mysteries. *Just Desserts*, *Fowl Prey*, and the latest, **Holy Terrors** (Avon, \$4.50, 256 pp), all feature Judith McMonigle, widow of the despicable Dan and owner of a hillside bed-and-breakfast in the Seattle area. Judith has converted her family home to this hostelry, and taken up catering on the side, to make a financial go of it. She is also exploring renewing her past relationship with police Lieutenant Joe Flynn, who had deserted her to marry "Herself" well before she married Dan on the rebound. Joe is trying to get an annulment through the church, and she and Joe have agreed not to see each other until the annulment goes through. This is hard to do, however, since Judith keeps ending up at the scene of crimes that Joe is investigating. In *Holy Terrors*, she is catering the church's Easter egg hunt when one of the new arrivals in the neighborhood is found murdered in the church basement. Judith's mother is her usual impossible self, and her neighbors, friends, and cousins are all just a little bit the wrong side of normal. Even the mystery is a little skewed, with just enough humor to make it hard to get too irritated with the characters. Maybe one day Judith will become solvent and she and Joe will solve their problems; until then, it is fun to watch her deal with her strange circle of friends and relatives when murder is afoot.

# MURDER BY DIRECTION

by William Heller



**W**ould the FBI really send a particular agent to investigate a murder on an Indian reservation simply because he is one-quarter Sioux? The Bureau in **Thunderheart** would, and does.

That agent is young Raymond Levoi, a straight-arrow played by Val Kilmer with slicked-back, close-cropped hair reminding no one that his last film role was as wild Jim Morrison in *The Doors*.

Ray only reluctantly admits his Indian heritage to his FBI superior and scarcely sees what advantage it might give him in the investigation. Going back to his "roots," which he has all but completely erased with his comfortable, Rolex-wearing, bureaucratic Washington, D.C., lifestyle, is not his idea of a plum assignment.

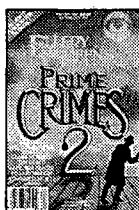
But, he thinks, at least his

partner in the case is the thoroughly professional and knowledgeable veteran agent Frank Coutelle (Sam Shepard). Ray can't wait to meet the hard-boiled agent everyone affectionately calls "Cooch." They are given three days to wrap up the case on their own.

The reservation is in the midst of what the government calls a virtual civil war. The progovernment faction wants to keep the status quo, in which it holds power and does the bidding of Washington. The traditionalists, who include the militant Aboriginal Rights Movement (ARM), want to bring the Indian Nation back to its proud heritage and spiritual ways.

To Cooch, this murder case is cut and dried. Without giving it much thought, he decides the killer is Jimmy Looks Twice (John Trudell), a charismatic

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leader in the militant ARM.

*Thunderheart*, we're told, is "inspired by events on several Indian reservations in the 1970's." And it does bring to mind incidents involving the American Indian Movement (AIM) and several confrontations between militant Indians and the FBI during that period.

To show that he's more FBI than Indian, Ray tends to go overboard with his lawman act. He roughs up any Indian at a moment's notice and is happy to level his shotgun frequently. He also is fond of spouting insults, calling Indians "Tonto" or "Chief." He, in turn, is sarcastically called "Washington Redskin" by the Indians.

Ray is on one of these self-denial power trips when he meets Walter Crow Horse (Graham Greene), a tribal police officer whose own investigative technique tells him to "listen to the wind." Crow Horse, whose stoic demeanor contrasts with Ray's, winds up offering clues and guidance that help the case along. Despite his initial reluctance, Ray gets drawn into his Indian heritage and winds up working with Crow Horse.

With scenery that is at once breathtaking and enervating, *Thunderheart* is a beautifully made motion picture. Filmed at the Pine Ridge Indian Reservation in South Dakota, this spir-

itual murder mystery shows the natural beauty of the Badlands along with the depressing, third-world living conditions of the reservation Indians it portrays.

The acting, from the top-billed on down, is first-rate. Kilmer's character grows and changes as the story unfolds.

Graham Greene, as the Indian cop, shows a serious side as well as a humorous one. After this and his Oscar-nominated role in *Dances with Wolves*, it would be nice to see Greene offered a wider range of parts.

You wouldn't want to encounter Sam Shepard in a dark alley, at least not after seeing him as the steely, hard-nosed agent who wants his way.

Also worth noting are the performances of John Trudell, a real-life Indian activist, as Jimmy Looks Twice, and Chief Ted Thin Elk, the medicine man whose dark, weatherbeaten face is a miniature Badlands itself.

Fred Thompson, who first came to the public eye as the minority counsel to the Senate Watergate Committee, and now enjoys a budding acting career, is the FBI official who assigns Ray this case. Ironically, a framed photo of President Nixon is conspicuously displayed in his office.



# THE STORY THAT WON



The March Mysterious Photo-

Kathleen Thurston of Kirk-  
mentions go to Lane Oling-  
ton; Shauna I. Sutliff of New  
son of Adairville, Kentucky; Ed Bird of Campbell River, British Columbia, Canada;  
Janice B. Weishaar of Webster, New York; Paul Ryan of Lansdale, Pennsylvania;  
Margaret Chaiet of West Hills, California; Robert V. Kesling of Ann Arbor, Michi-  
gan; Andy Dequasie of Pownal, Vermont; Peg Moffitt of Mantua, Ohio; Randall  
J. Covill of Atkinson, New Hampshire; and William F. Smith of Garden Grove,  
California.

tograph contest was won by  
wood, New York. Honorable  
house of Everett, Washing-  
York, New York; Steve Gray-

Photo by Stanley Schmidt

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## SUPER THIEF by Kathleen Thurston

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February is a funny kind of month—one day there's slushy, wet snow, the next day there's this dry white stuff all over your car that leaves chalky marks on your clothes. You can go to work in nice weather and then have to mess around cleaning the windshield to get home.

So here I am, a slushy night, trying to pry the wiper arm away so I can finish cleaning the wet snow off and this kid slams me from behind, "oomph!," and I crack my head on the windshield.

Then he tries to grab my purse off my arm, but I'm too fast for him. I've got a good grip on my purse, and he's running down the street with nothing but the broken strap in his hand. What a moron!

So I throw the purse in the front seat of my car, clasp the keys in my fist, and slam the car door shut. No more temptation for crooks.

I'm still pretty upset and I'd like to drive home, but you see, when the greatest purse-snatcher in the world slammed into me, I lost one of my contacts on this windshield. I need both of them to see to drive. The trouble is, even up close, I can't tell which is a plastic lens and which is a drop of water.



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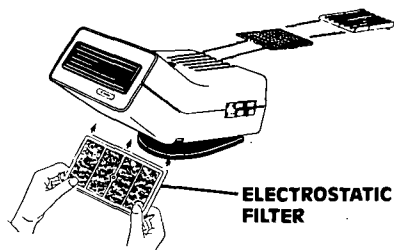
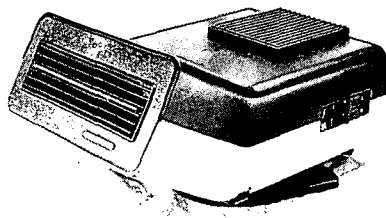
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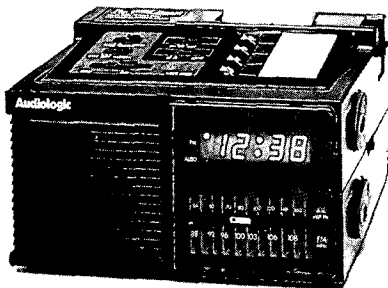
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